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# THE NATURE, EVOLUTION AND PRESENT EXTENSION OF THE ECUMENE IN THE SHIELD SECTION OF THE SAINT-MAURICE VALLEY (QUÉBEC)

par

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The Saint-Maurice valley, a great natural north-south corridor linking the Saint Lawrence lowlands with the rolling plateaus of interior Québec, was a well-travelled exploration, missionary and fur-trading route from 1650 until the late nineteenth century, and is today the seat of sprawling pulp and paper empires based on the region's abundant forest and hydro-electric resources. But this valley is also one of southern Québec's truly empty areas, with a low density rural population, a minimal acreage in farmland (in contrast with adjoining valleys, where physical conditions are similar), and almost no tourism or recreational development. The purpose of this article is to attempt to explain this paradox by describing in detail the evolution and present extension of the ecumene, agricultural and otherwise, in the Shield section of the valley between the Grand'Mère - Shawinigan conurbation in the south and the tiny farming parishes of La Croche and Saint-Jean-Bosco on the northern fringes of settlement.

## *Limits and subregions of the Saint-Maurice (« Mauricie ») area*

To define and delimit the Mauricie region is a challenging research problem in itself, for most of those authors who have written on the area have different conceptions as to its boundaries. For Blanchard<sup>1</sup>, the Mauricie comprises the watershed of the Saint-Maurice river, along with those sections of the Trois-Rivières sand delta which are drained by tributaries of the Yamachiche and Batiscan rivers. Boucher's Mauricie<sup>2</sup>, somewhat larger, includes the Saint-Maurice watershed, the rivière du Loup valley, and the Saint-Stanislas and Saint-Tite sections of the Batiscan river basin. The atlas « Centre du Québec méridional »<sup>3</sup>, which covers an area centered on the Mauricien cities of Trois-Rivières, Grand'Mère and Shawinigan, defines the region as extending from Berthier county in the west to Champlain county in the east and also including the south shore counties of Nicolet and Yamaska. None of these definitions are adequate. Although large sections of Nicolet and Yamaska lie within Trois-Rivières' zone of direct influence<sup>4</sup>, history, tradition, and, until late 1967, the lack of a bridge across the Saint

<sup>1</sup> BLANCHARD, Raoul, *La Mauricie*, Collection « L'Histoire Régionale », n° 3, Editions du Bien Public, Trois-Rivières, 1950, avant-propos.

<sup>2</sup> BOUCHER, Thomas, *Mauricie d'Autrefois*, Collection « L'Histoire Régionale », n° 11, Editions du Bien Public, Trois-Rivières, 1952, 206p.

<sup>3</sup> Published by the Bureau de Recherches économiques et scientifiques, Ministère de l'Industrie et du Commerce, Québec, 1963.

<sup>4</sup> *Centre du Québec méridional*, Plate III-B-7 (*Zones d'attraction socio-économique*).

# LAND USE SUBREGIONS OF THE LOWER MAURICIE

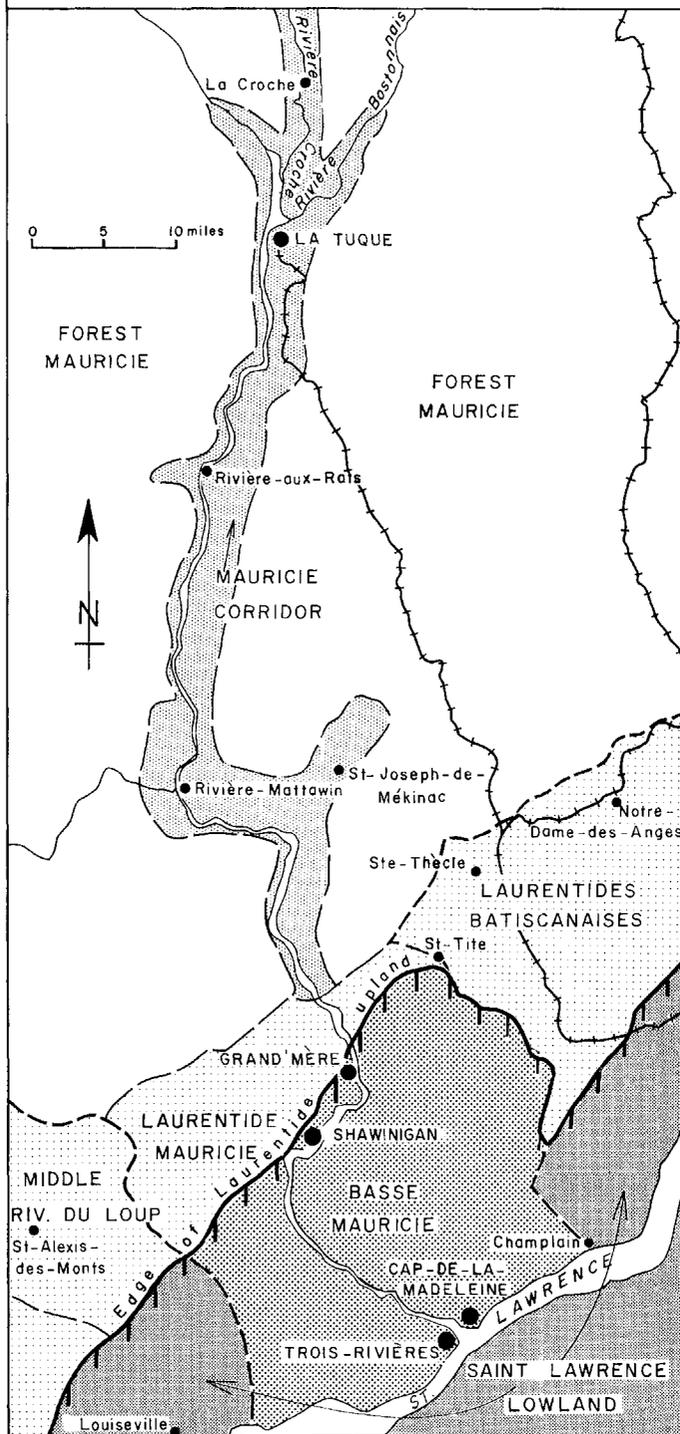


Figure 1



*Photo 1 Pulpwood in the Saint-Maurice river north of Saint-Jean-des-Piles. In the background, the entrance to the asymmetric U-shaped trough of the Mauricie corridor. (May 1967).*

Lawrence, have tied these areas more closely to communities of the south shore than to those of the north. Secondly, Joliette and Berthier counties not only lie outside the Mauricie but are also outside the orbit of its cities<sup>4</sup>. And the valley of the rivière du Loup should not be included with the Mauricie, for the local economy and road network are focused on Louiseville rather than on Trois-Rivières. Finally, the Saint-Michel-des-Saints section of the Mattawin basin can no longer be considered part of the Mauricie, for apart from an extremely poor gravel road leading to Rivière-Mattawin there are no direct communications axes linking the area with the Saint-Maurice. On the other hand, certain sections of adjoining watersheds such as the Batiscan are integral parts of the Mauricie; a good example is the thriving summer community of Lac-à-la-Tortue, located only one and one-half miles east of Saint-Georges-de-Grand'Mère and frequented largely by inhabitants of the Shawinigan - Grand'Mère conurbation, but lying on a lake feeding into the Batiscan drainage basin.

The writer's own « Mauricie » comprises four subregions (Figure 1) : the « basse Mauricie », a low-lying area extending from the Saint-Lawrence river to the Shield edge and containing the conurbations of Trois-Rivières - Cap-de-la-Madeleine and Shawinigan - Grand'Mère ; the « Laurentide Mauricie », a rolling belt of forested hills and narrow cleared valleys girdling the Shield edge between Saint-Tite and Saint-Elie ; the narrow, steep-walled « Mauricie corridor », extending from Saint-Jacques-des-Piles north to the Croche valley ; and the « forest Mauricie », a vast tract of continuous woodland sprawling between the Laurentide Mauricie and the northern limits of

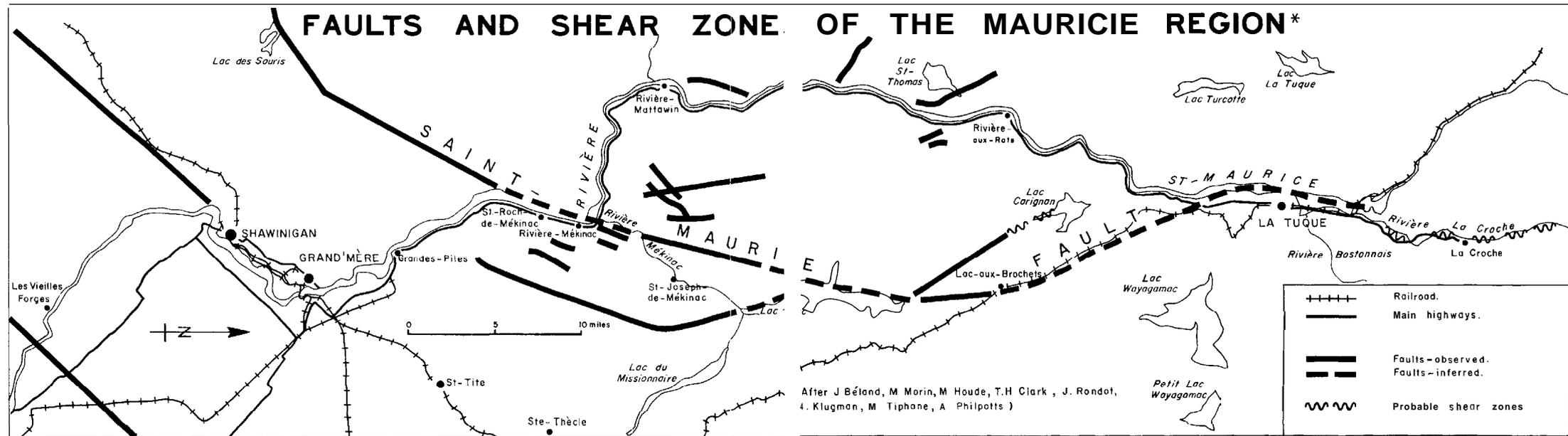


Figure 2

the drainage basin. As the writer's purpose is to describe the nature and evolution of the ecumene of the Shield areas of the Mauricie, only the Laurentide Mauricie and the Mauricie corridor will be dealt with in this article.

#### *Erosion surfaces, fault valleys and glacial scouring*

Much of the Mauricie is a vast platform, approximately 1,500 feet above sea level at La Croche, sloping gently south toward the Saint Lawrence lowlands. At the Shield edge the platform stands only 450 to 500 feet above sea level; here it has been deeply incised by preglacial watercourses and glacial ice tongues, and now comprises low, flat-topped massifs and rounded hills separated one from another by narrow, flat-bottomed valleys. Most of the platform is underlain by strongly foliated hornblende, pyroxene and biotite gneisses, but there are also zones of Grenville paragneisses, especially along the edge of the Shield. Granite, gabbro and anorthosite bodies have intruded the gneisses in many areas, for example north of Shawinigan, but they have been truncated by the erosion surface and have no characteristic topographic expression.

Fault valleys are important elements of the Mauricien landscape (Figure 2). The best example is a fifty mile long rectilinear valley scoured out along a major normal fault (the « Saint-Maurice fault »)<sup>5</sup>, and extending from lac des Souris in Caxton township north northeast to lac aux Brochets on the Canadian National Railroad's transcontinental route. The fault zone is occupied by elongate lakes (Mékinac, Cadotte, Dumont, Vincent), by

<sup>5</sup> PHILPOTTS, A.R., *Belleau-Desaulniers area*, Québec Dept. of Natural Resources, Geol. Report 127, 1967, p. 42. The fault extends southwest from lac des Souris as far as the Saint-Didace area, and may join up with the Sainte-Julienne fault in the New Glasgow region north of Montréal (F.F. Osborne and T.H. Clark, *New-Glasgow-Saint-Lin area*, Geol. Report 91, Geol. Surv. Branch, Québec Dept. of Mines, Québec, 1960, p. 33).

creeks and small rivers (McLaren Creek, rivière à la Pêche, rivière Mékinac), and by a wide, rectilinear section of the Saint-Maurice valley between ruisseau Bouchard and the hôtel Champoux. The narrow gorges of ruisseau Château and rivière à la Truite are also fault valleys, and the escarpment-bordered Saint-Maurice-Croche depression between Lac-à-Beauce and the northern limit of the Langelier map area lies along a shear zone. Finally, certain other linear valleys of the Mauricie lie along north-south striking joint planes.

Most students of the Mauricie admit that glacial erosion has played an important role in the shaping of its landscapes. Roches moutonnées, drumlin-shaped hills and glacial striae are common, with their orientation indicating a south southeast direction of ice flow. The Saint-Maurice valley between Saint-Jacques-des-Piles and ruisseau Bouchard is similarly oriented, and its steep rock walls and U-shaped profile (Photo 1) suggest intensive glacial erosion. In fact, Blanchard has described the entire Mauricie corridor as a glacial trough, but as most of the depression lies slightly transverse to the direction of ice flow this would seem unlikely. Should the corridor predate the Pleistocene epoch, in all likelihood it would have been carved out by preglacial watercourses along the north-south zones of structural weakness described above.

#### *Clays, sands, and river terraces*

Much of the bedrock of the Laurentide Mauricie is buried under a thick cover of bluish-grey, fossiliferous marine clays found at elevations of up to 600 feet. Widespread ravining and slumping of these clays has occurred along the Saint-Maurice river below Shawinigan. In the Charette, Saint-Elie, Saint-Mathieu, Saint-Timothée, Grand'Mère and Shawinigan areas thin beds of non-fossiliferous sands and silts deposited during the retreat of the Champlain sea overlie the clays. Thick sand and gravel accumulations exhibiting deltaic structures are found at the mouths of many of the rivers which



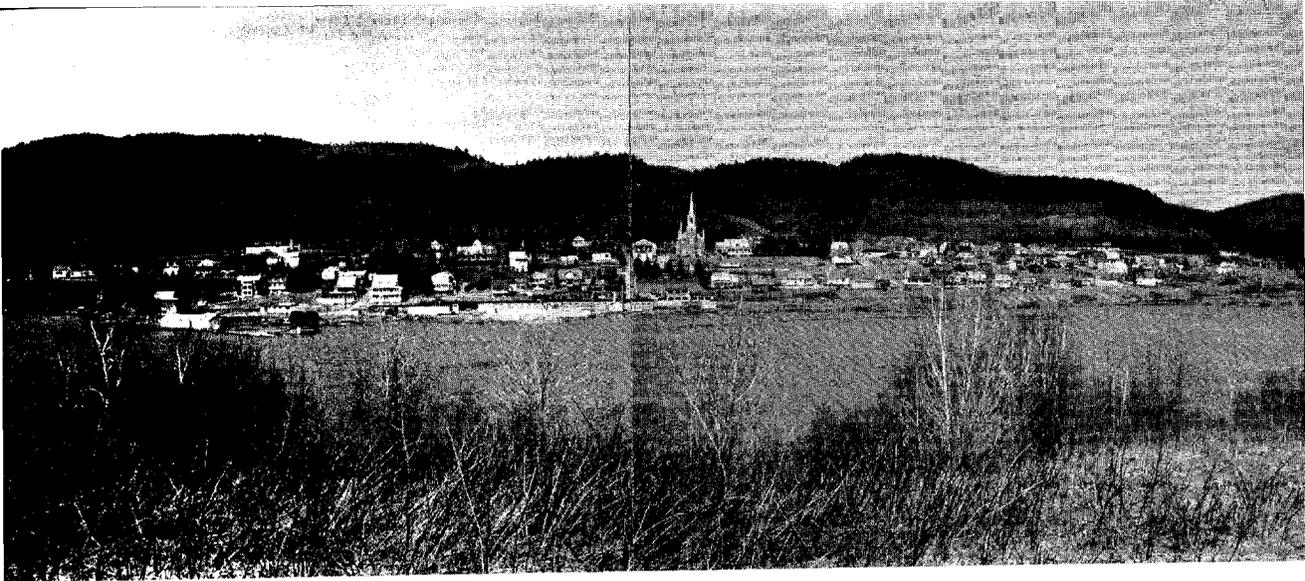
**Photo 2** Clay terraces of the Saint-Maurice valley north of Saint-Roch-de-Mékinac (east bank). The steep terrace slope to the right is in rough grazing land, but the flat and gently sloping areas are in hay and improved pasture. The river here is at 370 feet above sea level (May 1967).

emptied into the sea (e.g., the Mékinac du Nord valley near Saint-Tite). At Charette, a till-cored gravel ridge standing 550 feet above sea level has been identified by Gadd and Karrow as part of the Saint-Narcisse moraine<sup>6</sup>; foreset beds dipping steeply north indicate that it may have stood as a spit in the retreating sea.

The thick sand and gravel deposits of the Mauricie corridor were probably deposited in a freshwater environment (no marine fossils have been reported), although clay beds of probable marine origin underlie the sands between ruisseau Bouchard and the hôtel Champoux. Rondot<sup>7</sup> has reported a total thickness of 100 feet of varved clays in the Mékinac valley near Saint-Joseph, and clays thought to be lacustrine have also been observed along the rivière aux Rats, the rivière Wessonneau, and the lower Bostonnais. The absence of marine clays north of the Mékinac is puzzling, but an ice tongue occupying the Saint-Maurice valley during the Champlain sea episode may have prevented the marine waters from invading the area north of the Mékinac confluence. With the disappearance of the ice, the river, in response to postglacial isostatic adjustment and the shrinking of the Champlain sea, incised itself deeply in the thick unconsolidated deposits of the corridor, creating a series of narrow, steep-bluffed terraces paralleling the river. For example, in the Saint-Jacques and Saint-Jean-des-Piles areas, well-defined terrace levels are found at 490 and 545 feet above sea level, and at La Tuque at 425, 585, 615 and 675 feet. The flat-topped, steep-edged terraces

<sup>6</sup> GADD, N.R. and KARROW, P.F., *Surficial geology-Trois-Rivières*, Map 54-1959, Geol. Surv. Canada, 1959.

<sup>7</sup> RONDOT, J., *Région de Mattawin-Mékinac*, R.P. N° 395, Service de la carte géologique, Ministère des Mines, Québec, 1959, p. 8.



**Photo 3** The village of Saint-Jacques-des-Piles (or « Grandes-Piles »), at the mouth of the Mauricie corridor. Boat docks for « draveurs » are in the left middleground and a small wood-processing plant, the Boisvert company, is located immediately right of the docks. The road on the mountain slope behind the church leads to a small ski development (May 1967).

can be thought of as steps in a staircase type of landscape characteristic of many Laurentide valleys (e.g. the Sainte-Anne-de-la-Pérade and du Nord valleys). These steps have greatly influenced the shapes of fields, villages and towns along the Saint-Maurice; for example, note the long, narrow farms and strassendorf villages of the lower terrace levels at Saint-Roch-de-Mékinac, Rivière-Mattawin, and Lac-à-Beauce.

#### *The slow beginnings of colonization*

One of the more intriguing aspects of the present land use pattern of the Mauricie is the relatively small area of land now in agricultural use. This is partly explained by physical geography, for the stony tills of the « forest Mauricie » have little agricultural potential and almost none of this area was opened up for settlement. Most of the Laurentide Mauricie is also undulating and stony, and large areas cleared during the pioneering era have since reverted to scrub and forest. Finally, the sandy soils of the basse Mauricie, long considered agriculturally unpromising, have remained largely in scrub forest and « savane ». However, the almost total absence of farms along most of the Mauricie corridor is more difficult of explanation. In 1966, there were only 90 farms along the 100 miles between Saint-Jacques-des-Piles and the northern limits of La Croche parish, with most of these found north of La Tuque. The soils of the corridor, derived mainly from sands, are not dissimilar to those of the Laurentide sections of the Jacques-Cartier and Sainte-Anne-de-la-Pérade valleys, where there are large tracts of land under cultivation and a respectable degree of rural prosperity. It would seem, then, that factors other than pedology provide a more satisfactory explanation for the lack of development, agricultural and otherwise, of the Mauricie corridor, and this thesis will be developed in more detail below.

The settlement history of the Mauricie was quite different from that of the rest of the Laurentide fringe. For many years the vast timber reserves of the government-owned « forges Saint-Maurice »<sup>8</sup>, a bog iron ore smelting

<sup>8</sup> At Les Vieilles Forges in the basse Mauricie. See Mgr Albert Tessier, *Les forges Saint-Maurice (1729-1883)*, Collection « L'Histoire Régionale », n° 10, Editions du Bien Public, Trois-Rivières, 1952, 192p. The reserves were an integral part of the industrial complex, for 12,000 to 20,000 cords of wood were used each year to manufacture charcoal for the iron smelting operations.



**Photo 4** The clay-floored Saint-Joseph-de-Mékinac basin. The steep, ravined terrace slopes (right middleground) are also in clays, but the flat terrace top is capped by sands. Note the accordant summit levels of the Mauricien erosion surface in the background. Very little land abandonment has taken place in this isolated basin (May 1967).

complex, blocked access to the good clay lands lying north of the Trois-Rivières sand delta. In 1804 these reserves occupied approximately 197 square miles and extended as far north as the township of Caxton on the edge of the Shield. But decreasing profits and a shortage of ore resulted in the deterioration of the enterprise and finally in its sale, along with the fiefs of Saint-Maurice and Saint-Etienne, to the speculator Henry Stuart in 1846. These fiefs, and the townships lying farther to the north, were then broken up into lots of 100 acres and sold to French-Canadian colonists. The land was taken up quickly, especially in the Shawinigan, Saint-Boniface and Sainte-Flore areas, and by 1874 all of the good lots were gone. However, there was to be no significant movement of colonists any further north along the Saint-Maurice valley, for by the mid-nineteenth century timber companies had already profited from agriculture's slow start in the valley (explained by Les Forges) by placing an almost unbreakable stranglehold on the region's forest reserves. Today, a hundred years later, the landscapes of the Saint-Maurice valley north of Saint-Jacques-des-Piles continue to reflect the almost total dependence of the regional economy upon the forest industries.

#### *Lumber barons of the Saint-Maurice*

Although the history of lumbering in the Mauricie corridor has not yet been studied in detail, Blanchard, Boucher, Lafrance<sup>9</sup>, Panneton<sup>10</sup> and Uren<sup>11</sup> have provided adequate summaries. Lumbering began in the 1820s, and until the 1880s the companies exploited (and virtually exhausted) the magnificent white and red pine forests of the valley and its tributaries. The logs were floated downriver to sawmills at rivière Cachée, poste des Grès, La Gabelle, Trois-Rivières and elsewhere; some of the sawn timber was used locally but most was exported. The first « chantier » in the corridor was that of Thomas Greive on the Petite Bostonnais in the late 1820s, but after 1831 other Englishmen such as Patterson, Thompson, Hall, Gilmour and Studder also obtained forest concessions in the valley. There was no large-scale

<sup>9</sup> LAFRANCE, R., *L'occupation humaine dans la Mauricie*, in *Bulletin de l'Association des géographes du Québec*, n° 5, 1964, p. 41-48.

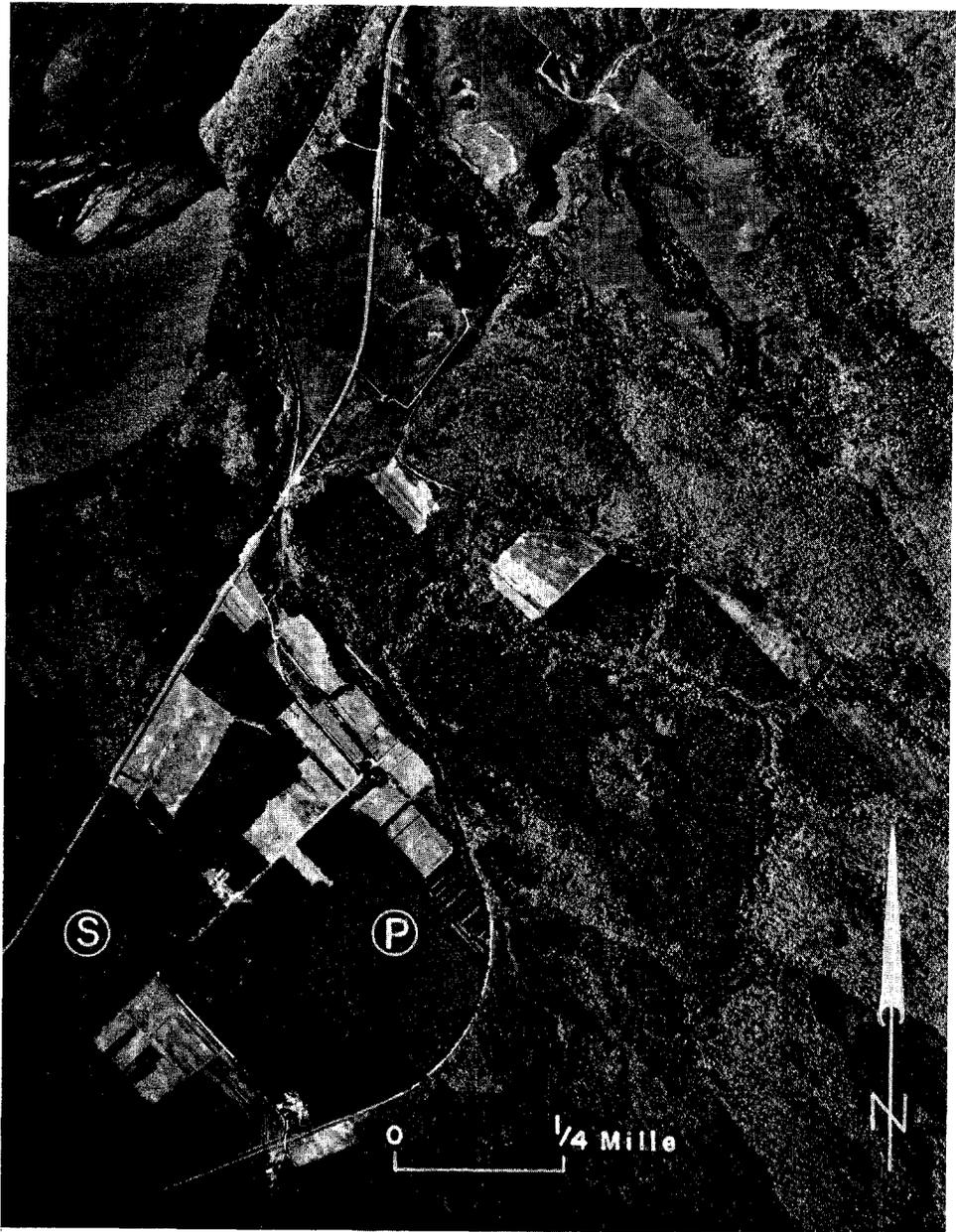
<sup>10</sup> PANNETON, A., *Horizons mauriciens*, Collection « L'Histoire Régionale », N° 11, Editions du Bien Public, Trois-Rivières, 1952, 135p.

<sup>11</sup> UREN, P.E., *The historical geography of the St. Maurice valley*, M.A. thesis in Geography, McGill University, 1949, 133p.



**Photo 5 (mosaic)** La Tuque is the focus of the forest operations of the *Compagnie Internationale de Papier* (Canadian International Paper) in the Saint-Maurice basin, and its pulp and paper mill (P), located close to its power supply, the 271,000 horsepower La Tuque generating station (G), is by far the largest single employer of the city. The urban landscapes of La Tuque are similar to those of many twentieth century Québec company towns (e.g., Beaupré, Donnacona, Grand'Mère). Its attractive managerial neighbourhood (E), with trees, large lawns, two-story frame houses, an Anglican church, and a red-brick Protestant school, contrasts with the wooden tenements and small frame houses of the predominantly French-speaking working-class « quartiers » (F). Attractive new subdivisions (B) composed of one-story modern bungalows are occupied largely by French-Canadians in the service industries or the professions.

Aerial photographs Q 64206-66 and Q 64133-200, Service de la Photogrammétrie et de la Cartographie, Photocartotheque provinciale, Ministère des Terres et Forêts, Québec, at 1:15,840, 1964 (mosaic slightly reduced).



**Photo 6** - Spruce (S) and pine (P) plantations on sand terraces at Proulx, southeast of Saint-Jacques-des-Piles. The whitish fields, sections of the plantation which have been logged, are now being used as nurseries and for experimental purposes. Note the pulpwood and retaining booms in the Saint-Maurice.

Aerial photograph Q. 64552-226, Photothèque provinciale de l'Air, Ministère des Terres et Forêts, Québec, at 1:15,840 (slightly reduced), taken in Sept. 1964.

forest exploitation until mid-century, for the falls and rapids at Shawinigan did not allow the floating of « log cribs » (« cages ») any farther down the river, but in the early 1850s the Lower Canada government resolved the problem by constructing a one thousand foot log slide and 15,000 feet of retaining booms here<sup>12</sup>; these improvements, and the construction of the « grand chemin public » in 1856 to what is now Saint-Jean-des-Piles, brought about the rapid expansion of the Mauricien lumber industry. New chantiers were opened in the Mékinac, Mattawin, rivière aux Rats and Trenche valleys<sup>13</sup>, and cutting was intensified throughout the basin. Over the winter of 1868-69, 39,404 pines were cut on Studder's concessions, 51,061 on Hall's, and 89,168 pines and 14,867 spruce on Baptist's<sup>14</sup>. More than 3,000 lumbermen worked in the chantiers during the winter of 1870, and during the following spring and summer an estimated 600,000 logs passed down the timber slide at Shawinigan. By 1880, « le gros pin avait presque complètement disparu dans la vallée du Saint-Maurice »<sup>15</sup>. In 1890 only 350,000 logs passed down the slide, and a large proportion of these were spruce. However, the establishment of a pulp mill at the chute de la Grand-Mère in 1890<sup>16</sup> gave a new orientation to the forest economy of the Mau-

<sup>12</sup> BOUCHER (1952), speaks of « la fameuse glissoire de mille pieds de long ; deux estacades, l'une en haut des chutes, et l'autre en bas, dans la baie inférieure, dont la longueur combinée atteignait 15,000 pieds ; 14 piliers dans la baie inférieure et 7 ou 8 en amont des chutes pour retenir les estacades en place malgré les courants » (p. 29).

The projects took between four and five years to complete. The work was carried out by settlers from Saint-Boniface parish, and employment opportunities on the construction site helped to stimulate the colonization of Shawinigan township.

<sup>13</sup> The table below shows the state of forest exploitation in the Saint-Maurice basin in 1852 :

COMPANY	Location of timber limits	Area in square miles
David Burnett	Croche valley	150
Pemberton & Fr.	Bostonnais and Flamand valleys	300
Campbell Moody	Croche and Trenche valleys	640
George Baptist	Rivière aux Rats and Mattawin valleys	705
Gilmour & Cie	Mattawin and Vermillion valleys	1,360
George B. Hall	Mattawin and Trenche valleys	1,900

(from Pierre Dupin, *Anciens chantiers du Saint-Maurice*. Pages trifluviennes, Série B, n° 7, Les Editions du Bien Public, Trois-Rivières, 1935, p. 28).

<sup>14</sup> George Baptist, a Scotsman by birth and the owner of the large sawmill at the poste des Grès, was described by Creighton as « practically king of the Saint-Maurice. The farmers who compose the scant populations of the neighbourhood are dependent upon him for a market and for supplies of all they need from the outside world. Their crops are consumed by his horses and men, and their sons and brothers find employment in his service. The village about the mill is his property and the inhabitants are his servants. Hundreds of men and horses, under the direction of scores of foremen, labour for him through summer and winter, undergoing the severest toil and perilling their lives to carry out his behests. His will is their law, his wages are their subsistence, and promotion in his service is their reward. Every foreman is chosen from the ranks of this great family. Should one of them take service with a rival house, he can never return to his allegiance. Great qualities of leadership are required for success in these vast enterprises, but if the rule of the lumber king is despotic, it is also patriarchal and beneficent ». (G.M. Grant ed., *Picturesque Canada ; the country as it was and is*, Belden Bros., Toronto, 1882, Vol. 1, Chapter entitled « French Canadian Life and Character » (J.G.A. Creighton), p. 102-103).

<sup>15</sup> PANNETON (1952), p. 103.

<sup>16</sup> « The Laurentide Pulp Company, Limited », founded by Montrealer John Forman but financed largely with American capital. It later became the « Laurentide Paper Company », and since 1933 has formed part of the Consolidated Paper Corporation (now Consolidated-Bathurst).

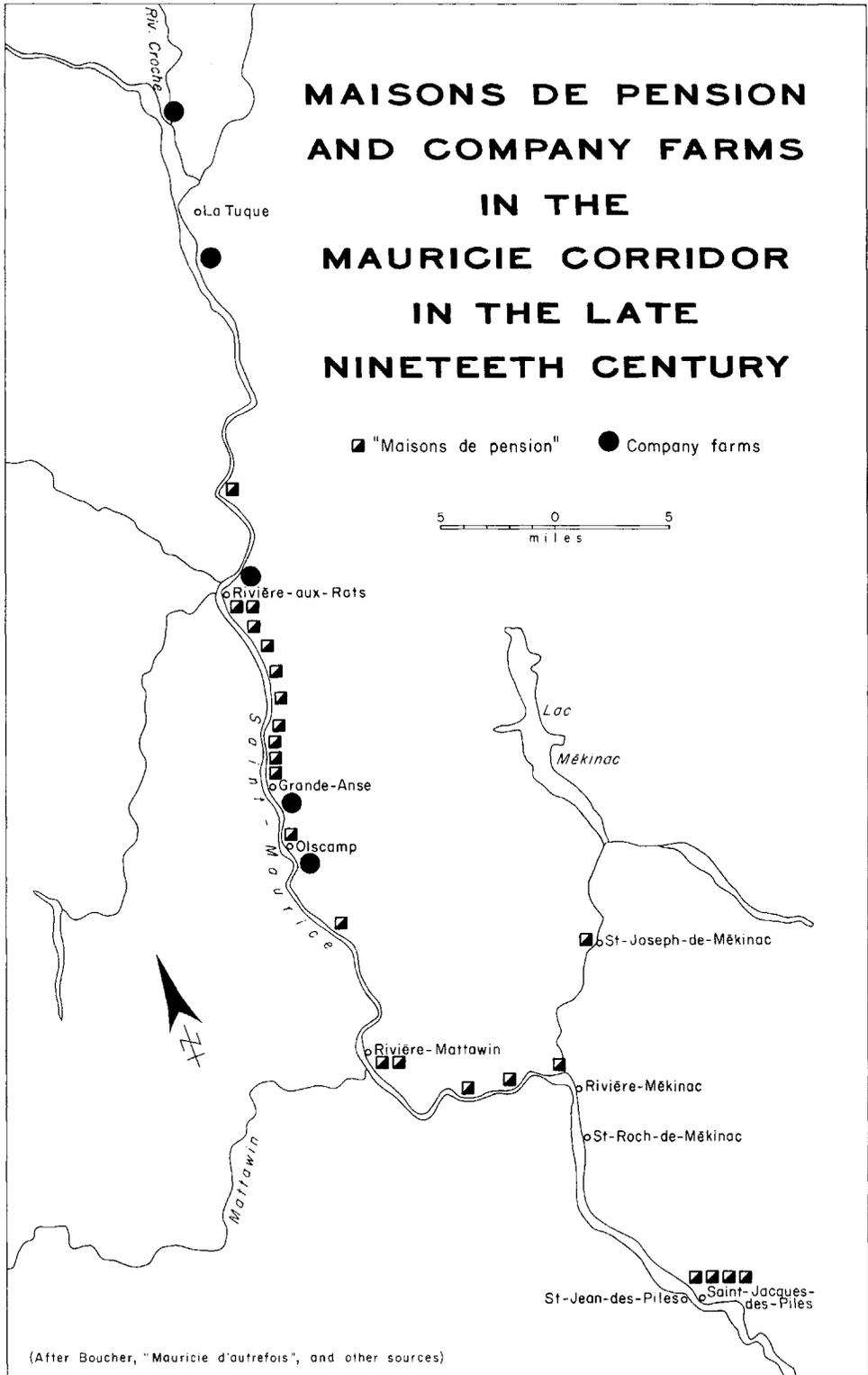


Figure 3

ricie, for the vast spruce and balsam fir forests of the basin could now be exploited profitably for pulpwood. Construction of paper mills at Grand'Mère (1899), Shawinigan (1902) and Trois-Rivières (1910), and of pulp mills at La Tuque and Cap-de-la-Madeleine (1910) consolidated the victory of « la pitoune » (pulpwood) over « le bois de sciage ». And today the pulp and paper industry continues to reign supreme in the Mauricie, even though Shawinigan and Trois-Rivières are now characterized by considerable industrial diversity.

### *The establishment of villages and towns*

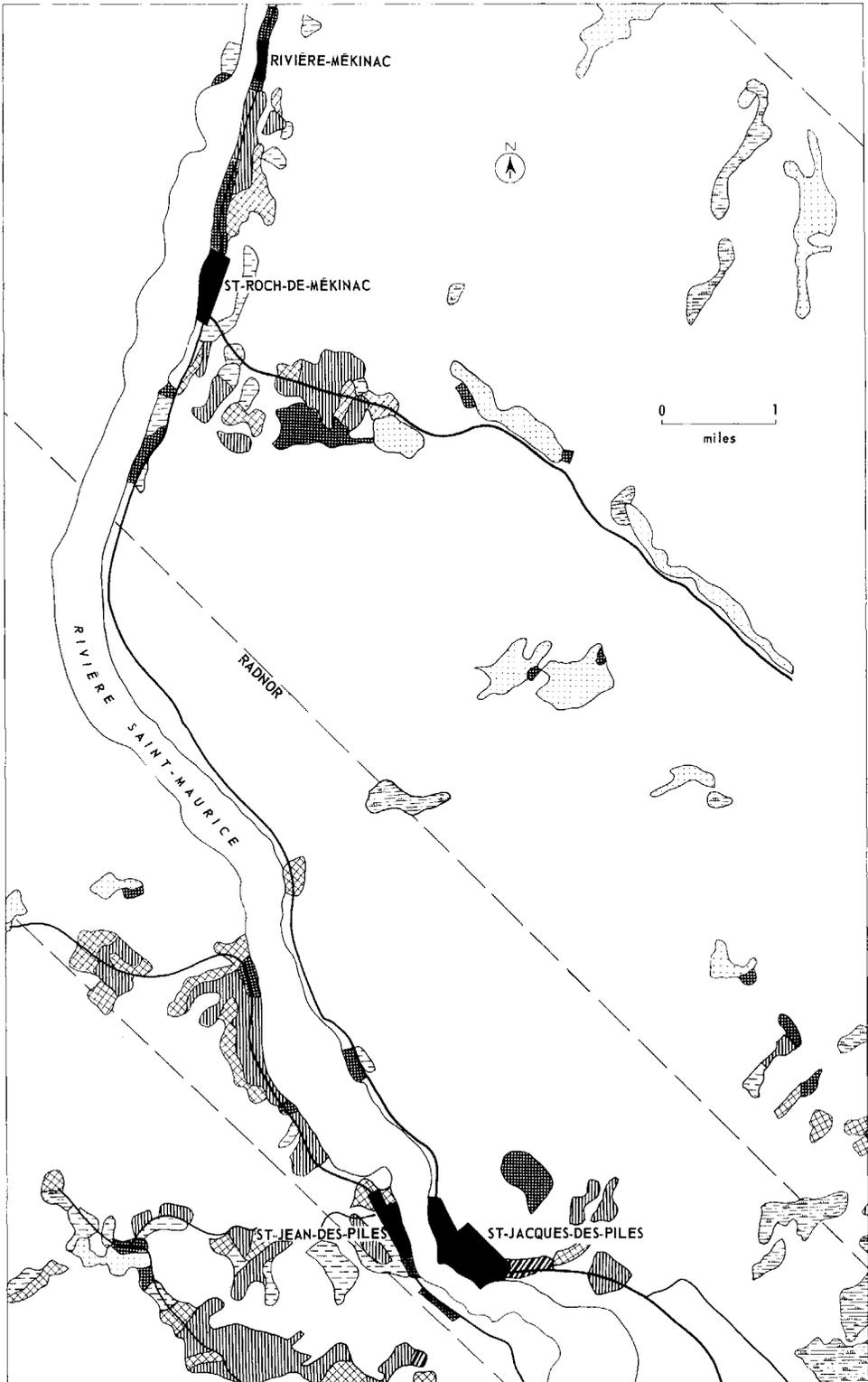
The forest industries gave birth to, or stimulated the development of, a number of communities along the Mauricie corridor between Saint-Jacques-des-Piles and La Croche. These communities and the patches of farm land which surround them are of particular historical interest and will be dealt with in some detail. Some were former fur-trading posts (e.g., La Tuque), others, genuine colonization parishes (Saint-Joseph-de-Mékinac), but most developed around « postes, relais et maisons de pension » established during the nineteenth century by Mauricien lumber companies (Figure 3). We have seen that after 1856 the lumber industry in the valley grew by leaps and bounds, employing a larger and larger labour force each winter. To feed and house the lumbermen vast quantities of supplies had to be expedited upriver, and so for this purpose supply depots and relay stations were established along the valley between the Shield edge and the « chantiers ». Also, large « company farms » were hacked out of the bush to supply the hundreds of horses in the camps with hay and grain. During the early fall, professional portagers (« portageux ») delivered supplies to the camps by canoe and by « chalands » (forty to fifty foot flat-bottomed boats)<sup>17</sup>, the latter being towed upriver by pairs of strong horses. During the winter the camps were supplied by bob-sleigh<sup>18</sup>. The communities of Saint-Jacques and Saint-Jean-des-Piles (until 1896 referred to collectively as « les Piles » or « les Grandes Piles »), situated at the narrow gateway to the Mauricie corridor, were the most important supply depots of the valley. The first inhabitants probably arrived here in the fall of 1851, « car on sait que pendant l'hiver 1851-52, un monsieur Grant . . . fit faire des milliers de plançons équarris, à la rivière Mattawin. Il lui fallut sans doute un pied-à-terre aux Piles »<sup>19</sup>. After 1856, les Piles became the main supply depot for Mauricien lumber companies, a stop-over point for lumbermen and portagers heading up to the camps, and a construction centre for « chalands ». Although a few farmers moved into the area after 1860, les Piles remained « un poste purement commercial, alimenté seulement et périodiquement par les portageux et par les travailleurs de la forêt et cela jusqu'à l'arrivée du chemin de fer »<sup>20</sup>. In 1880, the construction of a rail link between les Piles and Trois-

<sup>17</sup> « Embarcations à fond plat, relevées aux deux extrémités, longues de quarante à cinquante pieds, larges de douze à quinze, et capables de porter des cargaisons considérables, avec un tirant d'eau de quelques pouces seulement. La partie d'arrière est couverte et peut loger les bateliers les soirs de pluie ; un petit poêle en tôle donne sa chaleur et sert à la préparation des repas. Sur le toit de cette cabine improvisée, un énorme tolet soutient une rame de vingt-cinq à trente pieds de long, qu'un homme manœuvre en guise de gouvernail, en s'y appuyant de toute sa pesanteur ». (Dupin, 1935, p. 45).

<sup>18</sup> « Pendant l'hiver, les rivières et les lacs gelés donnaient un accès facile à tous les endroits de la forêt. Aussi, depuis les glaces d'automne jusqu'à la fonte des neiges, c'était une procession de voitures, qui portaient tous les jours des Piles, portant . . . les provisions nécessaires aux chantiers » (Dupin, 1935, p. 119).

<sup>19</sup> BOUCHER, (1952), p. 183.

<sup>20</sup> BOUCHER (1952), p. 185.



Même légende que la figure 9.

**Figure 4** Land use, St-Jacques des Piles section, June 1965.

Rivières (the « Embranchement des Piles ») greatly increased the village's importance ; the Ritchie sawmill was built here in the same year, and in 1881 the Drummonds constructed fourteen charcoal kilns in the village to supply their furnaces at the nearby Forges Radnor. In 1889 the river channel at rapide Manigonce was widened and a regular steamboat service was inaugurated between les Piles and La Tuque<sup>21</sup>. These were good days for the village, now the largest community of the valley north of Trois-Rivières, with local merchants such as Jean Crête controlling almost all of the navigation and commerce on the river. But the construction of a railroad linking La Tuque with the Saint Lawrence lowland (1909), and of a road along the east bank of the river between La Tuque and Saint-Jacques (early 1920s), ended what Panneton has called « l'âge du commerce fluvial » in the valley. Les Piles' importance diminished . . . the tiny industries moved away, the « maisons de pension » closed down, and les Piles reverted to the role of a quiet residential community. Panneton has put it well : « Après sa poussée de fièvre, le village des Piles retrouve son paisible sommeil »<sup>22</sup>.

Virtually all of the other communities of the Mauricie corridor also have settlement histories linked with logging. Some developed around « maisons de pension »<sup>23</sup> and « postes de relais », stop-over points for loggers and portagers travelling upriver. « Maisons de pensions » were found at the mouth of the Mékinac river, at pointe à Château, rapide Manigonce, Olscamp, Grande-Anse, rapide Croche, rivière à l'Oiseau, rivière Mattawin and rivière aux Rats ; and seven more were scattered here and there along the river (Figure 3). Not all of the twenty-odd pensions were in operation at the same time, but the total gives an idea of the amount of traffic on the Saint-Maurice in the late nineteenth century. Many of these pensions were located on company farms. Baptist's farm at Rivière-aux-Rats was the largest single area of cleared land in the corridor, employing twenty-two men, seventeen of whom had brought their families here. Other company farms were found at La Tuque and at the Croche river, and a large private farm near Grande-Anse belonged to a retired « chantiers » foreman of German extraction, Théodore Olscamp. Settlements such as Grande-Anse, Olscamp and Rivière-aux-Rats were without doubt far more populous and prosperous in the late nineteenth century than they are at present, most now consisting of only a few farmhouses, a handful of summer cottages, a post office, and a general store.

Only a handful of the settlements along the Mauricie (La Croche, Saint-Roch and Saint-Joseph-de-Mékinac) are traditional « paroisses de colonisation » in the Québec sense of the term. Saint-Roch and Saint-Joseph were

<sup>21</sup> The Norcross and Phillips Company constructed a steamboat which ran between les Piles and La Tuque between 1854 and 1856. The provincial government later attempted to establish steamboat service on the river ; however, its vessel, *La Galissonnière*, went aground at rapide Manigonce on her maiden voyage and never made the trip again (see Panneton (1952), p. 89-92).

<sup>22</sup> PANNETON (1952), p. 95.

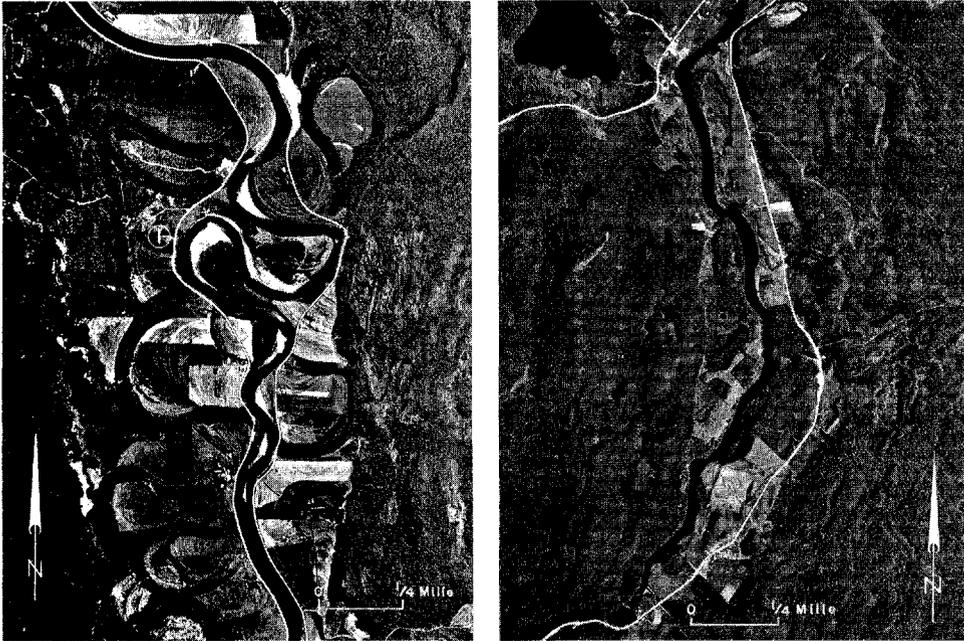
<sup>23</sup> « Ces maisons, où on avait plus d'égards pour les chevaux que pour les hommes, étaient ordinairement des maisons que l'on considérerait aujourd'hui à peu près convenables pour loger une famille de 5 ou 6 personnes. Là-dedans, on entassait jusqu'à 50 hommes pour la nuit . . . quelques-unes de ces maisons avaient des chambres sous le pignon, réservées aux personnages plus huppés, comme les bourgeois, les contremaîtres, etc. Quant aux chevaux, on les logeait dans les écuries qui pouvaient en contenir jusqu'à 50 » (Boucher (1952), p. 92).

« Tous les fondateurs de postes, d'auberges et de pensions étaient d'origine britannique, mais, en général, bilingues : les Nesbitt, les Collins, les Young, les Mackenzie, les Olscamp » (Boucher (1952), p. 184).



**Photo 7** Farming on channel deposits of the postglacial Saint-Maurice river at Lac-à-Beauce, where several progressive farmers have planted large areas of the light sandy soils in potatoes, beets, carrots, onions and other vegetables. These are the only viable agricultural exploitations between Saint-Jacques-des-Piles and La Tuque. A few small dairy farms are found north of the village.

Aerial photograph O 64132-179, Photothèque provinciale de l'Air, Ministère des Terres et Forêts, Québec, at 1:15,840 (slightly reduced), taken in June 1964.

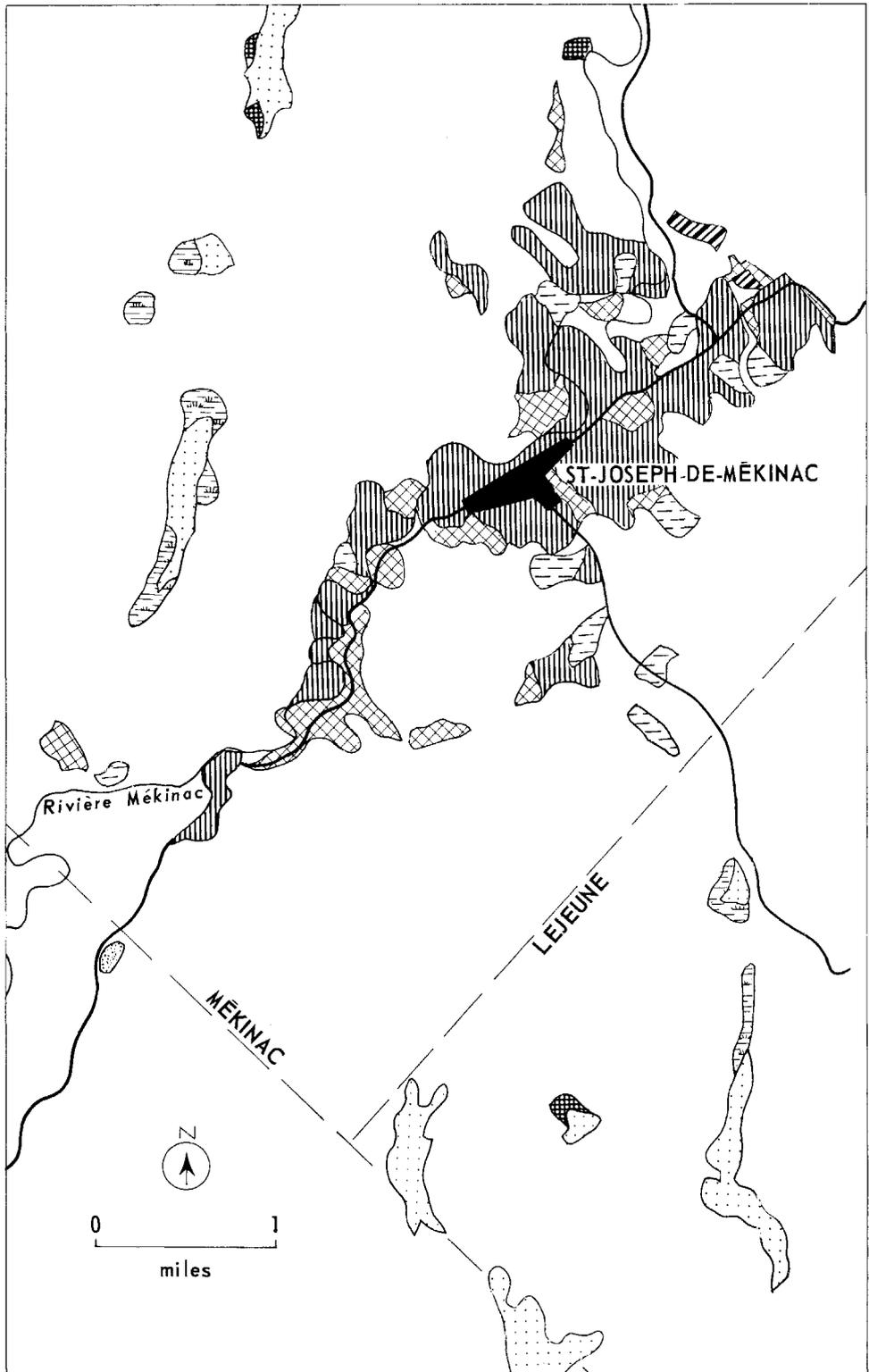


**Photos 8 and 9** The Croche and Bostonnais valleys, to the north and northeast of La Tuque respectively. Photo 8 shows a section of the Croche flood plain just north of the village of La Croche. Some of the meander cutoffs seen on the photograph are occupied by standing water and swamp vegetation, others by alder stands and scrub. The meander lobes show well-defined scrolls and the crescent-shaped splashes of white along the river are slipoff slopes of bare sand. All of the cleared land is at low elevations. The large areas of ploughed land (whitish fields) were planted to oats and potatoes in 1964 (the year the photograph was taken), while the greyish fields were in pasture or hay. Some areas of brush-covered farmland are seen at 1, but abandonment is the exception rather than the rule in the Croche valley. Photo 9 shows a section of the Bostonnais valley south of Saint-Jean-Bosco. Topography is undulating, areas of cleared land are discontinuous, and fields are small. Large areas of farmland have become derelict, and the «rang» along the western side of the valley is in the course of being abandoned.

Aerial photographs Q. 64143-217 (8) and Q. 64136-20 (9), Photothèque provinciale de l'Air, Ministère des Terres et Forêts, at 1:15,840 (slightly reduced), taken in June 1964.

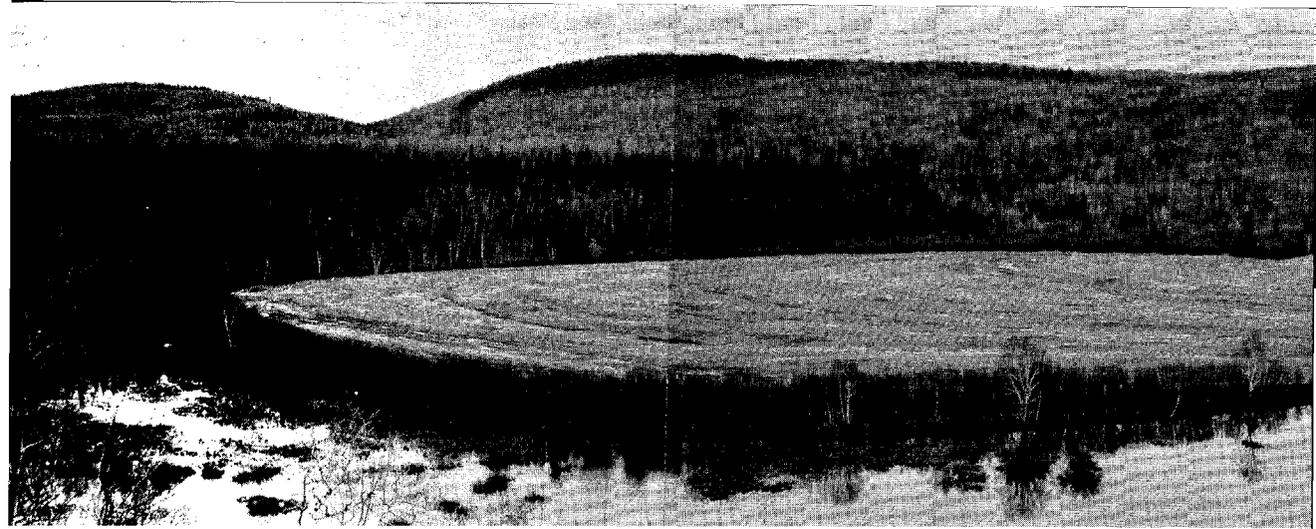
largely settled by French-Canadians from the Batiscan region and from Mont-Carmel after the opening, in 1865, of a winter road up the Mékinac du Nord valley between Saint-Tite and Saint-Roch. There are large tracts of clay soils in both areas, and agricultural settlement was widespread, especially at Saint-Roch where by 1900 there were farms scattered along both sides of the river from La Pêche to the Mattawin<sup>24</sup>. Two early-twentieth century events helped to kill farming here: the suspension of the Mauricie steamboat service following the construction of the railroad to La Tuque; and the building of a power dam at Grand'Mère (1914-1916), which raised the river level thirty feet and flooded fifteen good farms between La Pêche and Saint-Roch. But agriculture has persisted at Saint-Joseph, largely because of the area's isolation (Photo 4) and, farther to the north, the farms of the Croche river floodplain are still among the largest and most prosperous of the Mauricie.

<sup>24</sup> Today there are no farms whatsoever on the west side of the Saint-Roch section of the valley, and only a handful on the east.



Même légende que la figure 9.

**Figure 5** Land use, St-Joseph-de-Mékinac Basin, June 1965.

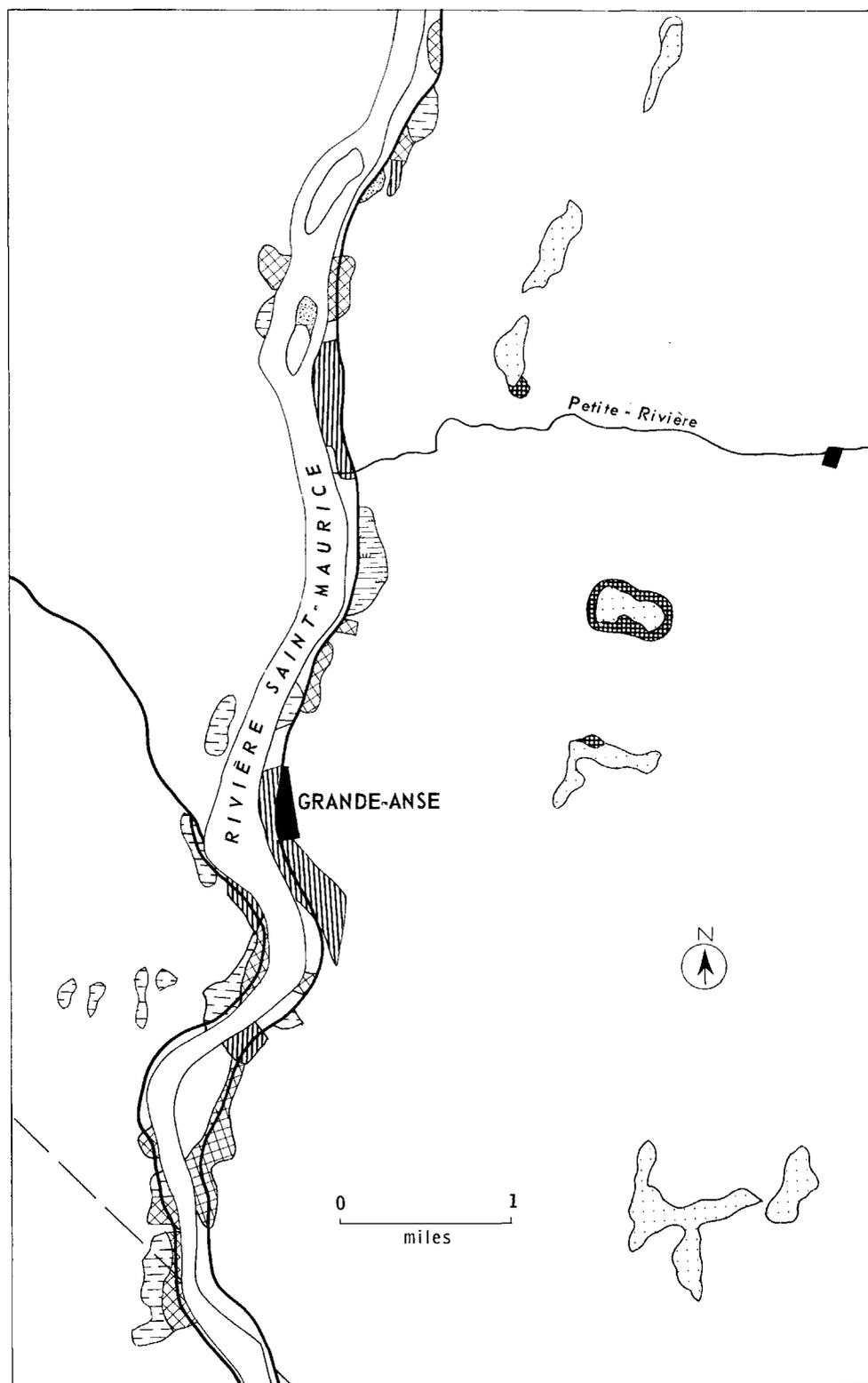


**Photo 10** Hayfield on a meander lobe of the Croche river valley ; well-defined scrolls are seen on the lobe. The stagnant meander cutoff is slowly occupied by swamp vegetation (May 1967).

The spectacular early-twentieth century growth of the pulp and paper centre of La Tuque completely overshadows all subsequent developments in the Mauricie corridor ; unfortunately, the town's rapid growth brought about the stagnation, and in some cases the disappearance, of the tiny communities scattered along the river between Lac-à-Beauce and les Piles. La Tuque was first a fur-trading post, later a tiny farming centre, and then the head of steamboat navigation on the river, but as late as 1904 the settlement only included a store and four or five farms, some of which were operated by Métis. However, the construction of a dam and a pulp mill here by the Brown family of New Hampshire, and the completion of a 37 mile rail link (since abandoned) to the lac Saint-Jean railroad in 1910, resulted in the establishment of a mono-industrial company town here whose population has now grown to about 13,500 (1966). La Tuque's destiny is tied to the forest industries (aluminum and textile plants here were short-lived), and the mill, part of the Canadian International Paper empire, now employs about 80 per cent of the local labour force. As La Tuque grew, the tiny settlements to the south withered and died, although the parish of La Croche farther to the north has prospered by supplying agricultural produce (milk, butter, potatoes, and other vegetables) to local merchants.

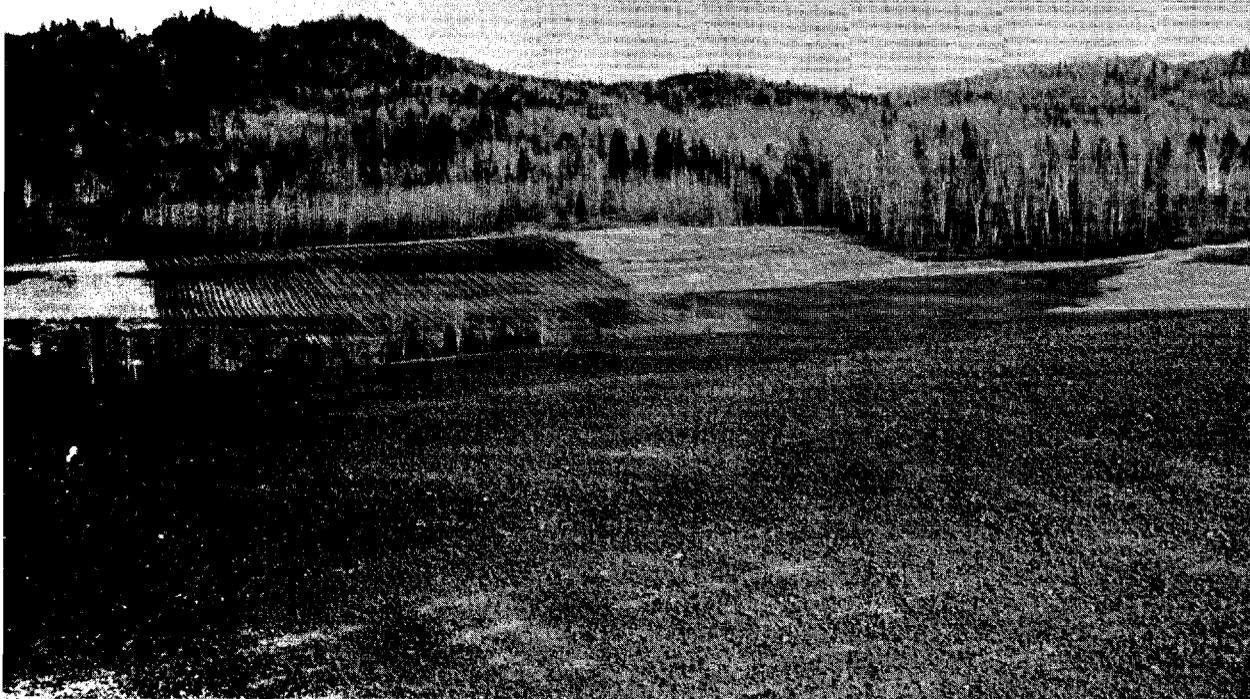
#### *Present land use patterns*

Almost all of the land under cultivation in the Laurentide Mauricie is strung out along the Shawinigan and Yamachiche river valleys, with the most prosperous farms being found on the wide clay plains of Saint-Boniface and Sainte-Flore, where dairying now predominates. The narrow sand plains of Charette and Saint-Elie are also in farmland, but the cleared areas are spatially unimportant and apart from a few fields in potatoes and vegetables there has been little agricultural specialization. Very few zones of upland soils were brought under cultivation in the Laurentide Mauricie, mainly because of colonization's late start here, and so abandonment of marginal soils has been less pronounced than in most other sections of the Laurentide hills. The proximity of the Shawinigan-Grand'Mère conurbation has had little effect upon agricultural land use patterns ; there has been almost no land abandonment and very little land speculation on the clay plains to the west of the cities and only limited development of market gardening. However, nearby lakes such as Gareau, des Souris, Perchaude, the attractive lac des Piles and the honky-tonk lac à la Tortue have known considerable tourist development, and are ringed by chalets owned largely by residents of the basse Mauricie conurbations.



Même légende que la figure 9.

**Figure 6** Land use, Grande-Anse section, June 1965.



**Photo 11** *Portion of a large and prosperous potato and vegetable farm at Lac-à-Beauce (Carignan), on sandy, well-drained channel deposits of the post-glacial Saint-Maurice river. Much of the Mauricie corridor lends itself to such specialised agriculture, but this is one of the few examples of commercialized farming in the region (May 1967).*

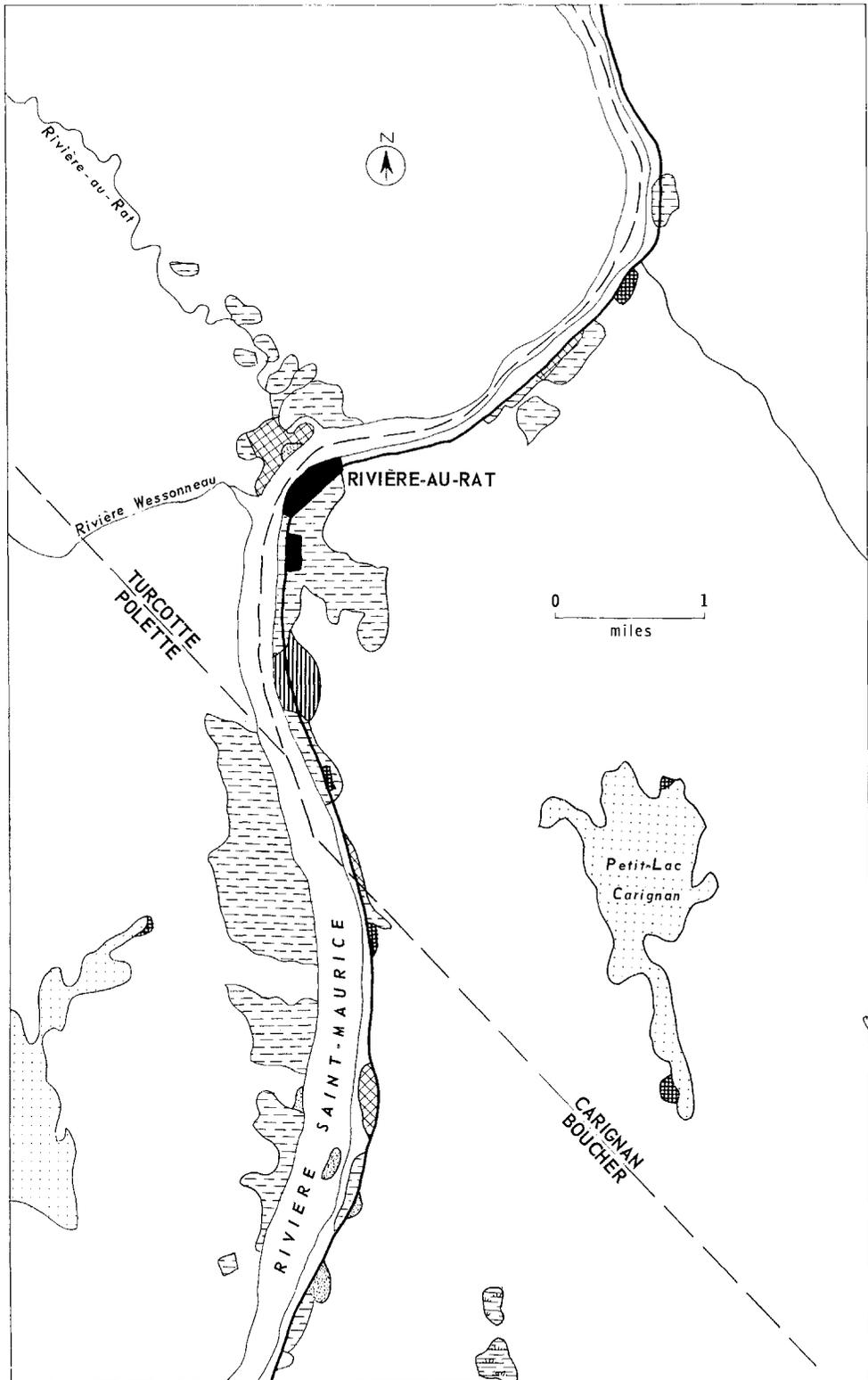
The most original feature of the land use pattern of the Laurentide Mauricie is the large area (9,600 acres, or about 15 square miles) in spruce and pine plantations at the mouth of the Mauricie corridor (Photo 6). Most of the plantations are found on sand terraces (Proulx, Grand'Mère) and sandy glacial lake plains (lac à la Tortue and Saint-Timothée areas), but a handful of spruce plantations on morainic soils are scattered along the river as far north as Saint-Roch. All of this area was colonized during the 1880s, but the acidic soils were quickly exhausted and by the beginning of the twentieth century most of the farms had been abandoned. Between 1913 and 1932 the Laurentide Paper Company of Grand'Mère purchased most of the land, planting it mainly in white spruce (*Picea glauca*), but also in Norway spruce (*Picea abies*) and Scots, grey, and red pine (*Pinus sylvestris*, *Pinus Banksiana*, *Pinus resinosa*)<sup>25</sup>. The plantations, now mature, are presently being exploited for pulpwood by the Consolidated-Bathurst Paper Company, successor to the Laurentide Company, and a large nursery and experimental station is maintained at Proulx, on Route 19 a few miles southeast of Saint-Jacques.

#### *Farming in the Mauricie corridor*

An interesting relationship exists between the structural geology of the Mauricie corridor and the distribution of the agricultural ecumene, for

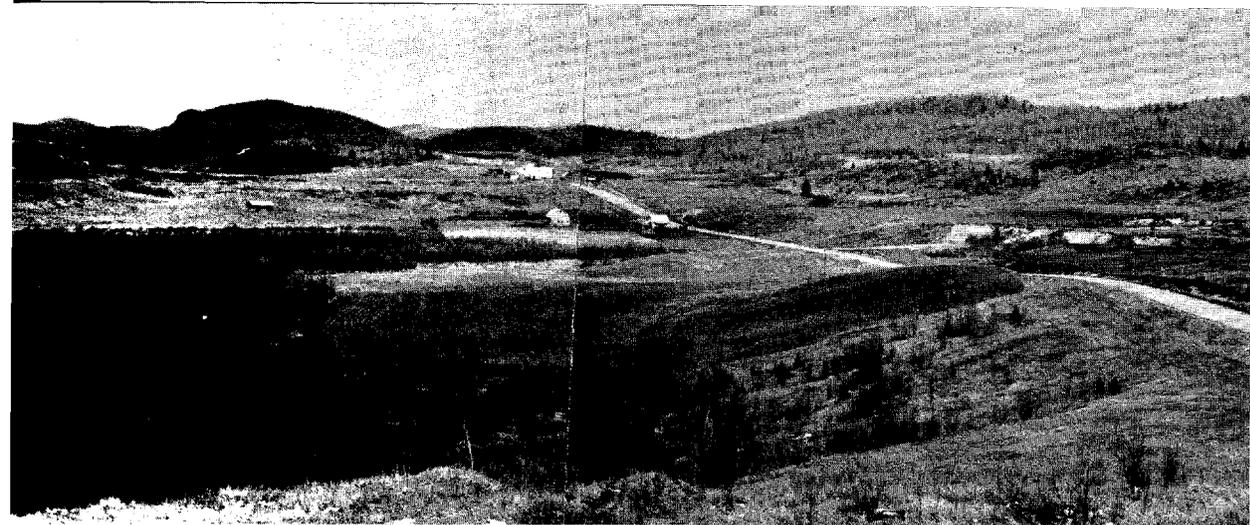
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<sup>25</sup> See CUNNINGHAM, G.C., *Growth and development of coniferous plantations at Grand'Mère, P.Q.*, Silvicultural Research Note 103, Canada Dept. of Resources and Development, Ottawa, 1953, 28 p.



Même légende que la figure 9.

**Figure 7** Land use, Rivière-au-Rat section, June 1965.

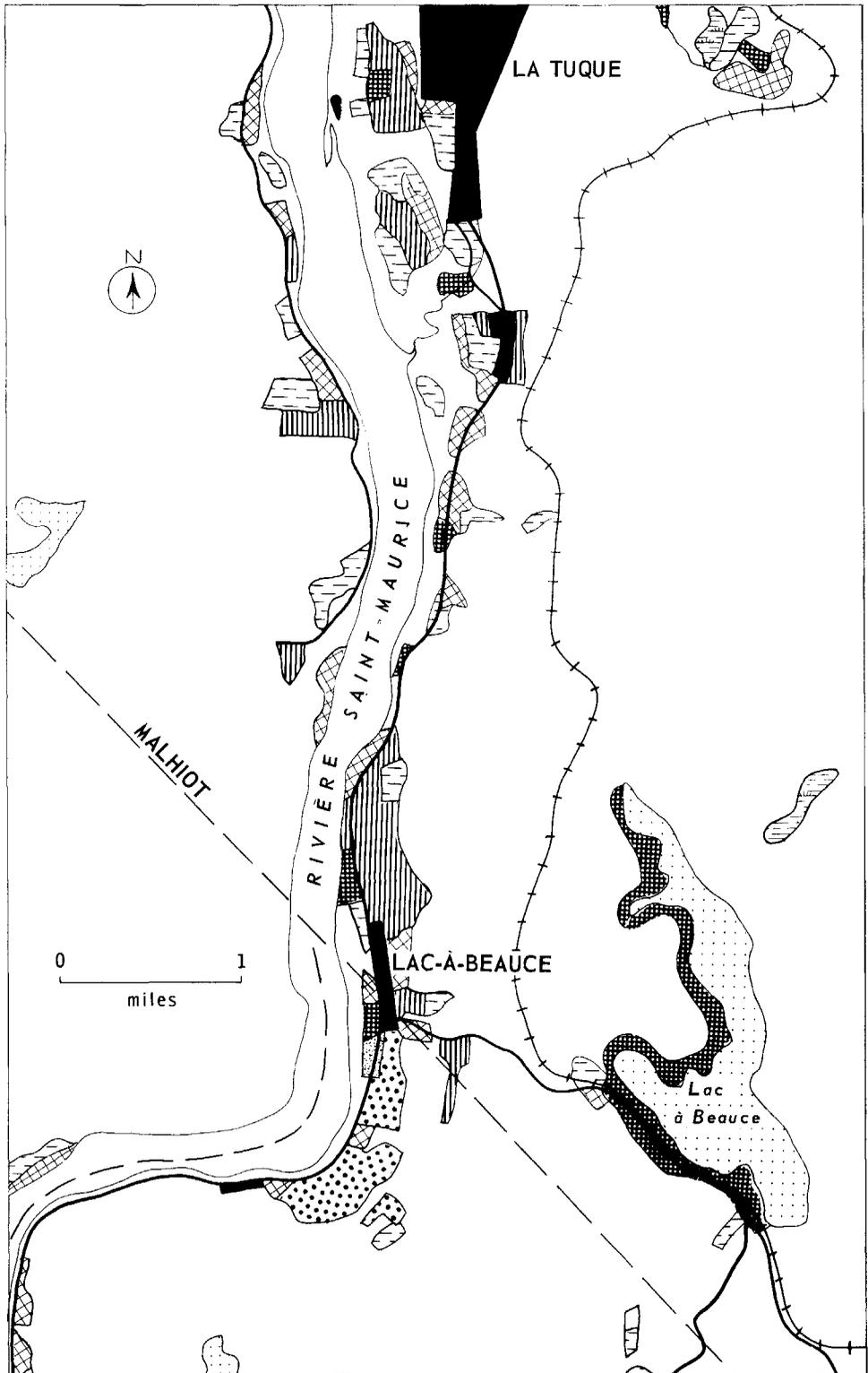


**Photo 12** *Marginal farmland in the Bostonnais valley northeast of La Tuque. Kames (left middleground), kame terraces (right middleground) and eskers give the valley rolling topography. Soils are sandy and stony, and the low-lying areas are poorly drained (May 1967).*

virtually all of the land which has been put to agricultural use is scattered along trenches of structural weakness such as the Saint-Maurice, Croche, Bostonnais and Mékinac valleys. All of this farmland is found on clays, sands and silts associated in one way or another with the Champlain transgression. Even during the colonization era no attempts were made to clear the adjacent till-mantled upland surfaces for farming, an indication of the lack of intensity of settlement in the basin, and surprisingly, several large tracts of good clay soils along the Saint-Maurice valley floor were by-passed by the settlers (e.g. at Saint-Roch-de-Mékinac).

Although agriculture has now virtually disappeared from the Mauricie corridor between Saint-Jacques-des-Piles and La Tuque, there are still roughly 60 farms scattered along the Croche and Bostonnais valleys. The light, sandy soils of the Croche floodplain, stonefree and permeable, are ideally suited for cereals and for hardy root crops such as potatoes and turnips. The farms, all situated on the valley floor, are subject to spring floods which can delay seeding operations until early June or later, but this disadvantage is offset by the large size of the fields and the flatness of the terrain, factors favourable for mechanization. La Tuque provides a ready market for the potatoes and dairy products of the Croche and for the vegetables of the three or four large commercial farms of Lac-à-Beauce, five miles south of the city. Some of the more prosperous farms of both the Croche and Lac-à-Beauce areas are owned by European immigrants, notably Germans and Dutch, experienced farmers who have made important investments in equipment and land improvement.

The tiny farms of the Bostonnais valley form a striking contrast with the sprawling exploitations of the Croche. The Bostonnais floodplain is narrow and discontinuous, and much of the cultivated land is found on the steep slopes of the kames, kame terraces and eskers which flank the river. The fields are too small and the soils too stony for commercial farming, and although a few farmers have made valiant efforts at land clearing (Photo 13), agriculture in the valley appears doomed and many areas are already in scrub. Large tracts of abandoned farmland are also found along the Mauricie corridor between Lac-à-Beauce and les Piles, particularly at Rivière-aux-Rats, where the largest « fermes de maîtres de chantiers » were located. Cadastral maps and aerial photographs indicate that at one time there was almost as much cleared land on the west bank of the river as on the east, an interesting problem, for there has never been a public road along the west bank above Saint-Jean-des-Piles. The few tiny farms which have survived are now served



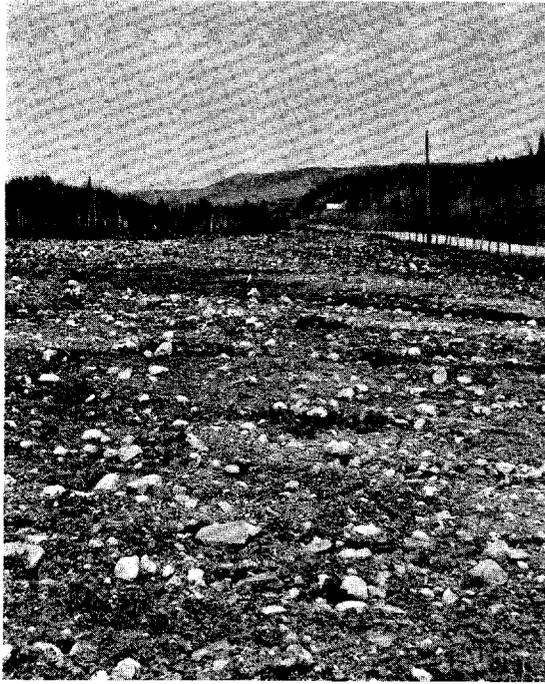
Même légende que la figure 9.

**Figure 8** Land use, Lac-à-Beauce section, June 1965.

either by ferry (Rivière-Mattawin), by rowboat (rivière à l'Oiseau), or by a poorly-maintained gravel road which runs five miles downriver from the C.I.P.'s suspension bridge at La Tuque.

*The recreational potential of the Mauricie corridor*

Although the rugged landscapes of the Mauricie are reminiscent of those of the Saguenay as well as being far more easily accessible, a profitable tourist industry has not yet taken root here. Recreational development has been hampered by the lack of good road communications with lac Saint-Jean<sup>26</sup>; by the inaccessibility of much of the west bank of the river; by the region's midway position between the tourist hinterlands of Québec and Montréal; by the large timber concessions of the Consolidated-Bathurst Company and the Compagnie Internationale



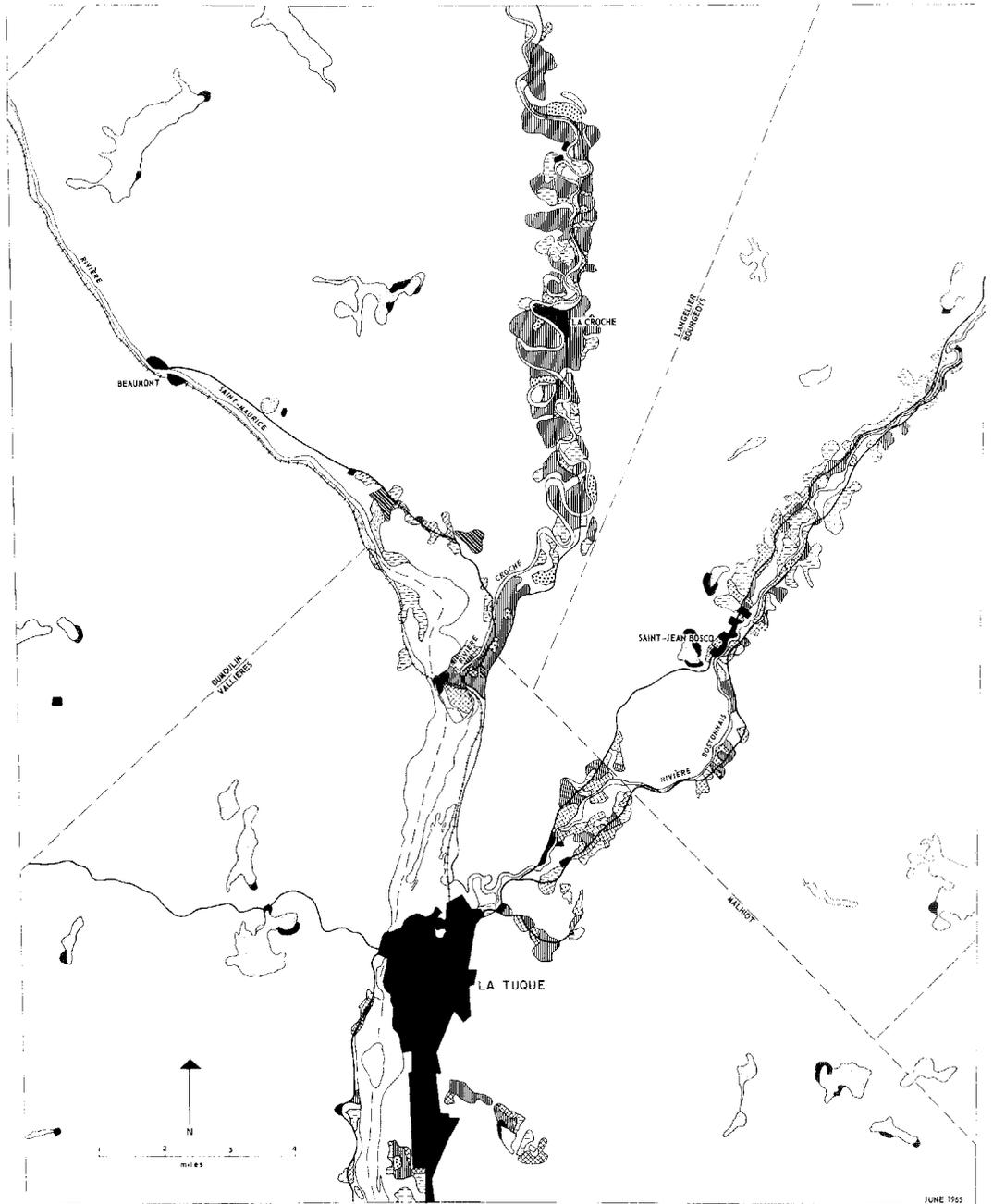
*Photo 13 Stony till soils, only recently cleared and plowed, in the Bostonnais valley near Saint-Jean-Bosco. Although the field will be seeded to potatoes or oats, the land is not even fit for rough pasture (May 1967).*

de Papier; and by the tight control exercised by a host of private fishing clubs, some American, others English and French-Canadian, over virtually all the lakes of the area. As a result, the valley's recreational ecumene, apart from the fishing clubs, comprises only a handful of modest summer cottages scattered here and there along the river, such as at Saint-Roch and Rivière-aux-Rats<sup>27</sup>. Within the last few years, however, the provincial government has assumed control of a vast, lake-studded tract north of the Mattawin river (Parc du Saint-Maurice) and has opened it to the public for fishing, camping, and skidooning; although the area is difficult of access (the visitor must cross the Saint-Maurice on a small cable-ferry at Rivière-Mattawin), it has proved popular. Also, the annual three-day Saint-Maurice canoe race brings thousands of tourists to the valley. But at the moment the Mauricie remains inadequately equipped to receive large numbers of tourists; for example, between Lac-à-Beauce and Saint-Jacques-des-Piles, the most picturesque section of the valley, there are only four small hotels and almost no restaurants. The extension of Autoroute 40 from Berthierville to Trois-Rivières, the improvement of Route 19 between Trois-Rivières and La Tuque, the construction of a road along the west bank of the river between Saint-Jean-des-Piles and La Tuque, the opening to the public of large attractive lakes such as

<sup>26</sup> An adequate road along the Bostonnais between La Tuque and Roberval was finally opened in 1966, and a paved surface was laid down in 1968.

<sup>27</sup> The only large cottage development in the valley is on lac à Beauce, but many of the vacationers here are from La Tuque.

CAHIERS DE GÉOGRAPHIE  
**MAURICIE CORRIDOR**  
**LA TUQUE SECTION**



**Figure 9**

JUNE 1955



*Photo 14* A former farm, now a summer home, on the west bank of the Saint-Maurice a few miles above Rivière-Mattawin. The property belongs to a Chicagoan who also maintains a horse-breeding farm at Grande-Anse. It is accessible by ferry (at Rivière Mattawin) or by small boat, like most of the other properties on the west bank of the river (May 1967).

Mékinac, Caribou, Dauphinais, des Cinq, and Wayagamac, and increased publicity by regional authorities and by the Ministère du Tourisme, de la Chasse et de la Pêche are the keys to the development of a solid recreational industry in the area.

### *Conclusion*

Sales, concessions and leases of vast tracts of forest along the Saint-Maurice valley, first to « les Forges Saint-Maurice » and later to timber companies, inhibited the flow of colonists into the region during the pioneering era of the mid-nineteenth century, and helps to explain the present-day low rural population densities of the valley. Company farms lost their « raison d'être » once good communications were established with the Saint Lawrence lowlands, but especially after the mechanization of the « chantiers » radically reduced the need for locally-grown hay and oats. As a result, farming has almost completely disappeared from the isolated west bank of the Saint-Maurice and would also appear to be doomed on the east bank, with the exception of the Lac-à-Beauce and La Croche areas, where farmers have adapted their production to meet the needs of the La Tuque market. The leasing of the fishing and hunting rights in almost all of the Mauricie to private, often foreign-controlled clubs, has impeded the development of summer cottaging in the region, which in turn has inhibited the expansion of the tiny villages of the Mauricie corridor between les Piles and La Tuque. Cancellation of many of these leases would be the first step in introducing some sort of equilibrium into the regional economy.

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