

A Remarkable Gift

By Robyn H. Griswold

The main hallway at Nashua Community College is a busy place. Students and professors hurry off to class; faculty and staff stop to chat and to share the latest news; and students gather to meet with friends and to relax between classes. With all of this activity, it is no surprise that few people ever pause to notice the small bronze plaque that hangs inconspicuously on the wall outside room 166. The plaque reads:

It was the desire of the late Ovila Cadorette and his wife Leona who cleared and farmed this land that a school be located on this site. This plaque is placed here in recognition of their interest in education.

The message is rather cryptic and it invites further questions. Who were Ovila and Leona Cadorette? Why was education such a priority for this couple? Why was a plaque placed here in their honor? For everyone who has benefitted from the educational opportunities provided by Nashua Community College, the story of the Cadorettes and their remarkable gift is one that should always be remembered. In fact, they are the reason why we are here today.

The origins of Nashua Community College go back to the late 1960s – a time of tremendous transition for the people of Nashua. Since 1826, the economy of Nashua had been largely dependent on textile manufacturing. That would all change after World War II. The availability of cheaper labor in the south, the shift from water to coal power, and outdated facilities in Nashua led to a fateful announcement on September 13, 1948 – the mills would be shut down. The “sheeting operations” at the Jackson Mill were the last to go in December 1951. One thousand factory workers lost their jobs at that time.¹

In the midst of this economic catastrophe, civic and business leaders joined forces to find a solution that would sustain Nashua into the future. They organized the Nashua-NH Foundation to raise capital to purchase the vacant mill space. The final price was \$500,000. Along with the Chamber of Commerce, the Foundation worked to attract new businesses and to establish a diversified economy that would provide long-term growth and employment opportunities. Their efforts soon began to pay off. Even before the final closure of the Jackson Mill, Sprague Electric Company set up shop in Nashua in 1948. This firm was involved in the manufacture of products such as “ceramic capacitors, printed circuits, and resistors.” In 1952, another electronics firm called Sanders Associates moved into most of the former mill space on Canal Street. More businesses would follow.²

The transformation of Nashua in the 1950s and 1960s can also be linked to larger political developments. The advent of the Cold War and the ensuing space race provided ample federal dollars to support the growth of “technology-related industries” along the Route 128 corridor in Massachusetts. Nashua’s close proximity to this area, favorable tax rates, available labor force, and warm welcome from local leaders lured high tech firms to the city. Sanders Associates is perhaps the best example. With 3,000 employees working in Nashua by 1962, the company developed products like missile guidance

systems, radar technology, computer circuits, and microwave components.³ As one local historian observed, these new companies attracted workers to Nashua in the 1950s and 1960s “just as the mills had done before.”⁴ Between 1950 and 1960, Nashua’s population increased by 11%. Demographic changes during the next decade would be even more pronounced. There were 39,096 residents of Nashua in 1960. By 1970, that number had grown to 55,820 – an increase of 42.8%! Nashua had lost its “small town atmosphere” and become a “medium-sized city.”⁵

During the 1960s, Sam Tamposi, Sr. and Gerald Nash were among a group of savvy local developers who sought to take advantage of this favorable economic environment. They recognized that this growing population would need to have places to live and shop. With the increasing prevalence of the automobile, homes and businesses could be located away from the city center. Tamposi and Nash began purchasing land on the outskirts of the city to construct industrial parks, shopping centers, and residential developments.⁶ Amherst Street (then known as Milford Road) was an attractive prospect. At the time, this was a rural sector of the city. Farms lined the quiet, two-lane road which would be unrecognizable to today’s commuter who sits in the daily traffic jams on Route 101A.



*Milford Road (Amherst Street) circa 1900.
Courtesy of Nashua Public Library*

One of the farms on Amherst Street belonged to Ovila and Leona Cadorette. Located on the corner of Thornton Road, the Cadorettes ran a dairy business on 66 acres. Sometime around 1968, Sam Tamposi offered them \$250,000 for the property. His plan was to build condominiums.⁷ Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars was a lot of money in the late 1960s. In 1968, the average price of a new home was \$24,600. The median household income was \$7,143. The average cost of a new car was \$2,750 and a gallon of gas cost around 33 cents.⁸ Sam Tamposi’s offer must have been very tempting for the couple. According to Beatrice and Leo Provencal, relatives of the Cadorettes, their lives had not been easy.

Ovila Cadorette was born in St. Simon de Bagot, Quebec in 1893. The next year, Ovila moved with his parents and older brother to Nashua, NH. The Cadorettes were probably drawn to Nashua by economic opportunity and the already sizable French-Canadian population. According the City of Nashua’s website, French-Canadians became the city’s largest ethnic group in the decades following the American Civil War.⁹ Sadly, Ovila’s mother passed away in 1895. Pressured by the burden of caring for

two young sons, the widower quickly remarried in June 1896. Eight new sisters and brothers were eventually added to the growing family.¹⁰

Unlike other French-Canadians who were drawn to jobs in the textile industry, the Cadorettes were farmers. An examination of census records suggests that Ovila's education was cut short. In 1910, he is listed as a sixteen year old farm hand working for his father and he had not attended school the previous year.¹¹ At some point, the family purchased property that abutted Round Pond (across the street from Nashua Community College). Having access to the pond provided another economic opportunity. In the days before electric refrigeration, every family had an ice box in their kitchen to keep their food cool. Ovila's father, Jean Baptiste, established a company to harvest and sell ice -- the Round Pond Ice Company. As one relative recalled in 1968, this was an involved process. Blocks of ice had to be cut when the ice was 26-28 inches thick. Wooden tracks were placed across the frozen pond to guide gas powered circular saws. These cut the ice into 4' by 2' blocks. An elevated conveyor belt was then used to transport the blocks into one of twelve ice houses for long term storage. It was possible to keep ice throughout the year since saw dust was used as insulation. A fleet of horse drawn wagons and later motorized trucks delivered ice to private homes and businesses throughout the community.¹² Ovila and his step-brothers, George and Roland, worked with their father in the business.¹³ In the 1930 census, Ovila's occupation is listed as an ice truck driver.¹⁴

Leona (Guilmette) Cadorette, born in Nashua in 1896, was the daughter of French-Canadian parents. As a young woman, she found work in with the Nashua Manufacturing Company. The census of 1920 lists a 23-year-old Leona Guilmette employed as a "spinner" and living at home with her parents.¹⁵ We do not know how Ovila and Leona met, but a clue is provided by a surviving photograph of the young couple that hangs in the home of Beatrice and Leo Provencal. The photograph shows Leona happily sitting side-saddle on Ovila's Harley Davidson motorcycle. Ovila poses next to her in the sidecar. It probably comes as no surprise that Leona would have been attracted to this young man. Their relatives reported that Ovila and Leona were motorcycle enthusiasts who enjoyed spending time zooming around the countryside. Since Leona did not drive, having a sidecar was a must.¹⁶ The couple married in Nashua on August 7, 1922.¹⁷

*Ovila and Leona circa. 1917.
Courtesy of Beatrice and Leo
Provencal*



After marrying Ovila, Leona continued to work at the Jackson Mill in downtown Nashua. Transportation was a challenge because Leona never learned to drive. Her niece reported that she befriended an engineer whose train passed by the farm early each morning. He would allow her to board the train thus saving her a long journey into Nashua by foot.¹⁸



*Leona Cadorette
Courtesy of Beatrice and Leo
Provençal*

Like many of their neighbors, Ovila and Leona must have found the years following World War II to be extremely challenging. It is likely that Leona was one of the 1,000 people who lost their jobs when the Jackson Mill closed in 1951. A few years earlier, the family's ice business had been threatened by the widespread adoption of electric refrigeration. Ovila's half-brother, Roland, attempted to revive the business by expanding into home oil delivery. The firm's name changed to Round Pond Oil and Ice Company to reflect the new focus.¹⁹ For reasons that are not completely clear -- perhaps the brothers had a falling out -- Ovila decided at that time to leave the family business. He was 54 years old.

In 1947, Ovila and Leona purchased 66 acres of land across Amherst Street to establish their own dairy farm.²⁰ They even moved their house from one side of Amherst Street to the other.²¹ Much of the property was wooded and they faced the arduous task of clearing the land. A 1949 newspaper article described the process used by the Cadorettes. First, the timber was cut and sold. Next, the stumps were bulldozed and then pulled from the ground by tractors. Through this process, the loss of topsoil was minimized.²² Like most farmers, their business was diversified. In addition to producing milk for sale, their relatives reported that they raised pigs. The recent discovery of an abandoned harrow (a farm implement used to smooth the soil after plowing) on the property suggests that the Cadorettes also grew crops -- perhaps as feed for the cows.

But life on the farm was not easy. Leona's niece, Beatrice, explained that Leona had a particularly "miserable" time. Because Ovila suffered from diabetes, illness often prevented him from working. Much of the responsibility for milking the cows would fall to Leona. Her nephew, Leo, explained that things would be especially difficult when a cow was sick or when they were calving. In those cases, Leona would need to stay up all night in the barn tending to the animals. Ovila and Leona

never had any children and their relatives do not recall them ever having hired help. The burden of running the farm was theirs alone.²³

By the late 1960s, the character of Nashua was changing rapidly. The presence of high tech firms like Sanders Associates created a strong demand for an educated labor force. Local leaders responded by calling for the establishment of a vocational-technical institute or junior college in Nashua. The state of New Hampshire had been providing vocational training for its citizens since 1945 when it set up schools in Portsmouth and Manchester for returning World War II veterans. In 1965, the State Board of Education was directed to establish “not more than five” additional vocational-technical schools throughout the state.²⁴ This move was part of a larger trend under President Johnson’s Great Society program to make higher education more accessible and affordable. One piece of legislation provided federal funding to set up new technical institutes and community colleges.²⁵ By 1967, civic and business leaders from Nashua were vigorously lobbying the state. At a March meeting of the House and Senate Education Committees, they testified that “the establishment of a vocational technical school in Nashua is vital to sustain the city’s economic boom and to insure that its younger residents will get the education they need to successfully meet the requirements of a demanding labor market.” Former Mayor Mario Vagge further explained that Nashua “industries were finding it difficult to obtain skilled help.” This sentiment was echoed by Chamber of Commerce President David Rock and other business leaders in attendance.²⁶ With the explosive growth of the city driving up the cost of land, the challenge for the state would be to find the right location for an affordable price.

Rising real estate values probably convinced Ovila and Leona Cadorette that it was a good time to sell their 66 acres. There was no shortage of buyers. Both Sam Tamposi and the State of NH expressed an interest. Kessler Farm, a 35 acre site about a mile closer to downtown Nashua, also became available at about the same time as the Cadorette property. A Nashua Telegraph article from October 1967 reported that Kessler Farm was the first choice of state officials charged with selecting a site for the new vocational technical institute in Nashua. Cadorette Farm was the second choice. As a condition of purchase, the city would be required to bring water and sewer services to the chosen property. One month later, after Governor King and the Executive Council had visited both sites, they decided to reverse course and make an offer on the Cadorette property. A committee was formed to negotiate a price.²⁷ Ultimately, it was Sam Tamposi who would acquire Kessler Farm – today an extensive condominium and apartment complex.²⁸ It seemed like the Cadorette Farm, too, was destined to become a condominium development. Sam Tamposi’s offer of \$250,000 was a generous one and it would help to finance the Cadorette’s retirement. In the end, the state was only able to offer \$125,000.²⁹ It seemed plans for a college would have to be put on hold.

At this critical juncture, the Cadorettes agreed to accept the state’s offer. Why would anyone willingly choose to give up so much money? One hundred twenty five thousand dollars a substantial sum even today. Beatrice and Leo Provencal said the answer was simple. They explained that the Cadorettes had never had access to higher education. Their lives in the mill, the ice business, and on the farm had been difficult and they appreciated that education had the power to create new opportunities. As Beatrice put it, “they knew what education meant. No one could ever take a person’s education away.” Never having had any children of their own, the Cadorettes also agreed they would like to see a school

built that would benefit the young people of the greater Nashua area. For them, the money was not important. In the end, Ovila reportedly told Mr. Tamposi, "I don't need the money."³⁰ On Saturday, May 11th, 1968, the farm machinery and dairy equipment were auctioned off and Ovila made plans to move his home once again – this time to its present location on Thornton Road.³¹ The purchase was completed in July 1968 and construction of the college began in 1969.³²

*Construction of Nashua
Community College circa. 1970.
While the college officially opened
in September 1970, the first
classes were held off-site due to
construction delays.
Courtesy Beatrice and Leo
Provencal*



In September 1970, the NH Vocational-Technical College at Nashua officially opened. (The state had authorized the granting of degrees in 1969 and New Hampshire's technical institutes became colleges.) This was the newest college to be built in a system that already consisted of facilities in Portsmouth, Manchester, Concord, Berlin, Laconia, and Claremont.³³ The first freshman class had 97 students taught by ten members of the faculty. Programs such as industrial electricity, industrial electronics, electro/mechanical drafting, and machine tool processes were offered to meet the needs of local employers. Tuition was set at \$250 per year.³⁴

Sadly, Ovila did not live to attend the dedication ceremony on May 2, 1971. He had passed away suddenly at his home on Thornton Road in June 1968.³⁵ Leona, however, was in attendance along with her niece Beatrice. Following the ceremony, the women were greeted by national, state, and local dignitaries including Lawrence Davenport, Chairman of the National Advisory Board on Vocational Education; Governor Walter Peterson; Councilor Bernie Streeter; and United States Representative, James Cleveland.³⁶



*Dedication Ceremony of NH
Vocational-Technical College at
Nashua, May 2, 1971
Courtesy Beatrice and Leo Provencal*

*Beatrice Provencal and Leona
Cadorette, May 2, 1971
Courtesy Beatrice and Leo
Provencal*



Today, students from around the greater Nashua region continue to enjoy access to a quality, affordable education that is close to home. We have grown from a small technical institute into a comprehensive community college with over 2,000 students enrolled in more than fifty degree and certificate programs. In 2010, the college celebrated 40 years of service. A new Health, Sciences, and Humanities Building with 48,000 square feet of classrooms, laboratories, and a state of the art auditorium opened the following year. Plans for expansion continue with an addition to the automotive building in 2012.³⁷ When Beatrice and Leo were asked what Ovila and Leona would have thought about Nashua Community College today, they exclaimed without hesitation – “They would be amazed!”³⁸ All of this would not have been possible without the foresight and the generosity of the Cadorettes. Their story and their remarkable gift should never be forgotten.

*Ovila and Leona Cadorette
c. 1967
Courtesy of Beatrice and Leo
Provencal*



Notes

¹The Nashua History Committee. *The Nashua Experience*. (Canaan, NH: Phoenix Publishing, 1978), 101; 235-236.

²*Ibid.*, 236-237, 242.

³*Ibid.*, 237.

⁴Alison Zaya, Steven Butzel and Linda N. Taggart. *The Nashua Experience: A Three Decade Upgrade, 1978-2008*. (Portsmouth, NH: Jetty House, 2009), 2.

⁵Nashua History Committee, 241.

⁶*Ibid.*, 242-243; Alison Zaya, Steven Butzel and Linda N. Taggart, 11-13.

⁷Beatrice and Leo Provencal. Oral Interview by Robyn H. Griswold (October 2011).

⁸"What did things cost in 1967?" *Answers.com*, accessed April 8, 2012, http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What_did_things_cost_in_1967.

⁹"Nashua History," *The City of Nashua, New Hampshire*, accessed April 8, 2012, <http://www.gonashua.com/LivingHere/HistoryofNashua/tabid/896/Default.aspx>.

¹⁰“Descendants de Gaspard Laliberté, Septième generation,” accessed February 20, 2012, <http://pages.videotron.com/ancestre/pafg22.htm>.

¹¹1910 United States Census, Nashua, Hillsborough County, NH

¹² John Stylianos, “On the Nashua Area Scene,” *Nashua Telegraph* (Nashua, NH), March 27, 1968.

¹³ *Nashua and Hudson Directory for the Year Beginning January 1937*, (Boston, MA: H.A. Manning Co., 1937), 80.

¹⁴1930 United States Census, Nashua, Hillsborough County, NH

¹⁵1920 United States Census, Nashua, Hillsborough County, NH

¹⁶Beatrice and Leo Provencal Interview.

¹⁷“New Hampshire Marriage Records Index, 1637-1947,” *Ancestry.com* (online database), (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011), FHL Film No. 2057688.

¹⁸Beatrice and Leo Provencal Interview.

¹⁹“Obituaries and Funerals, A. Roland Cadorette,” *Nashua Telegraph* (Nashua, NH), September 10, 1974; Stylianos, March 27, 1968.

²⁰ *Deed of Sale from John and Katharine Kelley to Ovila S. and Leona O. Cadorette*, (Hillsborough County, NH), October 17, 1947, Book 1167, Pages 229-231.

²¹Beatrice and Leo Provencal Interview; “Nearing Home,” *Nashua Telegraph*, (Nashua, NH), March 2, 1951.

²²“Farm News,” *Nashua Telegraph*, (Nashua, NH), May 5, 1949.

²³Beatrice and Leo Provencal Interview.

²⁴“College History,” *Great Bay Community College*, accessed April 8, 2012, http://greatbay.edu/?a0=59&a1=college_history; “Nashua Facility is State’s Newest Tech College,” *Nashua Telegraph*, (Nashua, NH), April 30, 1971.

²⁵Chafe

²⁶ Claudette Durocher, “City Officials Plead for Tech School Here,” *Nashua Telegraph* (Nashua, NH), March 23, 1967.

²⁷ Carl C. Craft, “State Favoring Tech Institute on Milford Road,” *Nashua Telegraph* (Nashua, NH), October 12, 1967; Adolphe Bernotas, “Milford Road Site Selected for Tech Institute,” *Nashua Telegraph*, (Nashua, NH), November 10, 1967.

²⁸Alison Zaya, Steven Butzel and Linda N. Taggart, 11-13.

²⁹"State Pays \$125,000 for Tech Institute Site," *Nashua Telegraph* (Nashua, NH), December 1, 1967.

³⁰Beatrice and Leo Provencal Interview.

³¹"Public Auction, Farm Machinery," *Nashua Telegraph* (Nashua, NH), May 9, 1968.

³²*Deed of Sale from Leona Cadorette to the State of NH.* (Hillsborough County, NH), July 12, 1968, Book 1986, Page 0351; "Proposed Nashua Vocational-Technical Institute," *Nashua Telegraph* (Nashua, NH), December 5, 1968.

³³"Nashua Facility is State's Newest Tech College," *Nashua Telegraph* (Nashua, NH), April 30, 1971.

³⁴Durocher, Claudette. "Vocational Technical College Offers Wide Opportunities," *Nashua Telegraph* (Nashua, NH), January 30, 1971.

³⁵"Obituary, Ovila Cadorette," *Nashua Telegraph* (Nashua, NH), June 26, 1968.

³⁶"Dedication Open House Scheduled for Sunday." *Nashua Telegraph* (Nashua, NH), May 5, 1949.

³⁷"President's Message," *Nashua Community College*, accessed April 8, 2012, <http://www.nashuacc.edu/about-nashua-community-college/presidents-message>

³⁸Beatrice and Leo Provencal Interview.

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