The sound and the fury

The fabled southeast winds off of Cape Breton’s highlands make for good storytelling, and may soon fuel clean energy

by JOE FITZGERALD
This wasn’t your ordinary wind. In the late winter of 1960, a new school was being built in the Acadian Cape Breton town of Cheticamp. The school faced Cheticamp Harbour, with its back to the Cape Breton Highlands. All was calm. Until it wasn’t. “The front section of the school, where the auditorium was, was a steel structure,” says Napoleon Chiasson, the school’s vice-principal. “On that particular night there was a steel beam resting, and it hadn’t been welded or bolted into place yet. Next to the school was a convent. That beam picked up in the wind, went in one window in the corner of the convent and out the other, and on to the harbour. The next day it took eight men to pick it up and bring it back.”

Fortunately, none of the sisters was hurt. But it added to the legend of the awesome, even violent power of what the people here call “les suêtes,” or the south-east winds. They say it can take the bark off trees.

Chicago assured me that les suêtes can appear with lightning quickness. “In March of ’93 it was the most beautiful day, the harbour was frozen, and we were having a bonfire. Everybody and their dog were up there, on their Ski-Doos and doing whatever. We were there until about 10:30, and then a group of us moved on to our place to play some cards. Then it hit like a hammer. When these people left, it took them over an hour to get home, only a 10-minute distance away. They could not move. A number of people were storm-stayed that same evening at the Gabriel Lounge and some of the restaurants. And an extension to the old hospital had its roof blown off.”

“Before a suêtes wind, it is dead calm and eerily quiet,” says Dave Deveau, the retail operations manager of the Bishop’s Cellar wine store in Halifax, who grew up in Cheticamp and used to operate a restaurant there. “Then you begin to hear the howling in the mountains. The smoke from chimneys goes straight up in the air and the mountains also seem visually closer. My father, who worked for Parks Canada driving a snowplow, once had to crawl on his hands and knees across a field to the truck.”

Deveau says les suêtes have overturned transport trucks whose drivers dared the fabled wind. “There is a bad stretch in Point Cross just before Grand Etang. It’s a prime spot for strong winds, and trucks leaving empty are really vulnerable.”

Les suêtes can occur any time of the year, but November to March is most common. In winter the area may experience two or three suêtes a month.

“The most prominent suêtes occur when we have a low-pressure system coming up from the south,” says CTV
meteorologist Cindy Day. “Because the wind around a low-pressure system is always counterclockwise, as the low is approaching Nova Scotia the wrap-around winds become southeasterly. It’s those southeasterly winds that become les suêtes over the Cape Breton Highlands.”

The same southeasterly winds blow across the entire province but usually do not reach more than 50 or 60 kilometres an hour over the mainland. When they start to push up against the Cape Breton Highlands, though, they are transformed.

“There are tracks or valleys between the peaks of the mountains,” says Day, “and that wind is funnelled into those more narrow tracks. The compression that forces the wind in those narrow tracks and up over the highlands intensifies its speed. So it comes out at the top of the highlands and back down, where it’s released on the Gulf side. You have wind going in at 50 or 60 kilometres an hour and coming out in gusts well over 100 kilometres an hour. “A les suêtes wind that reaches 160 km/h—and that’s fairly common
“Before a suêtes wind, it is dead calm and eerily quiet. Then you begin to hear the howling in the mountains. The smoke from chimneys goes straight up in the air and the mountains also seem visually closer” — Dave Deveau

when les suêtes are really kicking up—that is a hurricane-force gust.” says Day.

While exploring Cheticamp and the adjoining communities of Grand Etang and Saint-Joseph-du-Moine, I heard tales of cars being flipped, windows getting blown out, and roofs being blown off. One woman told me her aunt had a 76-foot trailer anchored at both ends and strapped with three tie-downs. During a severe suêtes, all three tie-downs snapped and the trailer was pulled from its anchors and flipped over. Another suêtes pushed back a fishing boat approaching Cheticamp Island at full throttle, all the while pelting it with rocks whipped up from shore.

The havoc wrought by les suêtes on land can become outright terror at sea. In the spring of 1983, a long liner got caught in a big suêtes more than 19 kilometres offshore. “We could hear them on the radio, and it was lucky nobody was lost that night,” says Gaston Doucet, a local fisherman. “The boat was moving along with broken windows, and when they reached the wharf the guys were just shaking. They didn’t even tie the boat, they just jumped on the wharf and ran up to the Legion.”

Doucet, who fishes lobster in May and June and crab in the summer, says wise fishermen do not tempt fate when it comes to les suêtes. “I remember trolling in the fall for cod before it got closed off in 1992, and on a good day we’d go seven or eight miles out. And if it was giving the least bit of southeast, we’d go three or four miles out, because you can’t trust them. It’s not like any other wind. It’s so quick.”

The winds that have for so long forced residents to bolster their structures beyond national codes and adjust their event planning may soon be an economic advantage. Wind is power. Already Nova Scotia Power is operating a 60-megawatt Vestas wind turbine at Grand Etang.

It’s an impressive sight, but to many it is merely symbolic. Nova Scotia Power operates only one other turbine, at the opposite end of the province in Yarmouth County. And the one in Grand Etang automatically shuts off when winds are stronger than 40 kilometres.

To harness the power of les suêtes, new technology will be needed, says Monique Aucoin, the project co-ordinator with the Grand Etang Harbour Authority. “We are discussing the construction of a completely different type of wind turbine with a private investor and entrepreneur,” says Aucoin. This turbine would operate in higher winds, enabling the community to take advantage of its invisible renewable resource.

“One thing we are planning is to build a new cold-storage facility that local fishermen can use and power it with wind-generated energy,” says Aucoin. “This will free the fishermen from paying buyers to store their product and put more money back into the community.”

I had hoped to feel the power of les suêtes while in Cheticamp but had to be content with the friendly welcomes I received wherever I went. “Did you bring this weather with you?” I was asked time after time. I doubted my skills as a lucky harbinger but was satisfied that the local residents were enjoying a peaceful respite.
My first hint of an ancient celebration was on a beautiful fall day while driving the Cabot Trail in Cape Breton. As my girlfriend and I passed the village of Saint Joseph-du-Moine, it was not the fiery leaves of the mountains or the choppy sea that grabbed our attention. Instead, it was a yard filled with dozens of mannequins, all donning masks of famous people.

We stopped and cautiously approached. It was rather creepy, walking up to Richard Nixon and Princess Diana smiling at us. After taking some photos and shrugging our shoulders we got back in the car, slightly unnerved.

Later I learned that the property belonged to the late Joe Delaney, a staunch advocate of the Acadian Mi-Careme festival. What looked like mannequins were actually scarecrows decorated with mi-careme masks. Delaney had built them to scare real crows, but then tourists encouraged him to forget the garden and fill his yard with more figures, which he did.

The Mi-Careme has its roots in the France of the Middle Ages. The word comes from the French demi (half) and careme (lent). The practice was brought to the French colonies in North America and today remains in only three areas: Quebec, the Magdalen Islands, and northwest Cape Breton.

The Mi-Careme is a break in the period of Christian pre-Easter fasting known as Lent. It was decided to allow the people one day, a Thursday halfway through the 40-day fast, to eat, drink, play music and dance. A tradition evolved where people dressed in costumes and masks went from house to house. The residents tried to guess who these mi-caremes were, while providing food and drink.

The Mi-Careme almost disappeared in Cape Breton in the early 1980s, as people became more affluent and homes more expensively furnished. Fewer homeowners wanted rowdy mi-caremes coming into their houses tracking mud and potentially causing damage. The solution was to get a community centre host the Mi-Careme festival. Today the week-long Mi-Careme is the biggest festival in the area.

A new interpretive centre will open this May in Saint Joseph-du-Moine to celebrate the history and evolution of the Mi-Careme. On display are dozens of papier mâché mi-careme masks made by former fish-plant workers. Today’s masks are wonderfully artful compared to the burlap sacks used in bygone days.

Some purists say the real spirit of “running the Mi-Careme” is lost unless celebrants go door to door. Still, it remains a unique gem in the cultural heritage of Nova Scotia. — J.F.