

# VAL-JALBERT: THE ORIGINS OF



# A PLANNED COMMUNITY



The site of the former town of Val-Jalbert, now incorporated into the municipality of Chambord in the Lac-Saint-Jean region north of Québec City, is highly rated in tourist guides to Québec. More than 200,000 tourists, including several thousand Europeans, visit the historic village every year. In the sociocultural context of Québec it is unique: not only does it operate without grants, it even manages to earn a profit.

Val-Jalbert first began to attract the attention of tourists in the 1960s as a ghost town (**figure 1**). Visitors to the site saw before them an abandoned village covered in dense vegetation. Little by little it had been overtaken by nature, its natural beauty, its quaint character, its ruins, and its cemetery—where the last inhabitants of the town are said to be resting—presenting a seemingly irresistible draw.

A good deal of research has been done on Val-Jalbert in the past few years. First, historians confronted with the economic decline of a once prosperous region began probing the history of its industrial development.<sup>1</sup> Then the regional authorities, alarmed by the relentless deterioration of the buildings in this ghost town, began to worry that this “historical resource” would ultimately disappear. It is in this context that I was asked by the authorities to supervise a group of researchers charged with preparing a plan for the preservation and development of the site.<sup>2</sup> Our first challenge, before recommending a strategy for preserving Val-Jalbert, was to develop a more accurate picture of its history and its relative importance. Armed with this broader knowledge, we would be better able to focus on the most efficient ways of presenting the site and buildings in the current context, and for an ever-more varied and sophisticated clientele of tourists.

Figure 10. Val-Jalbert. St. George Street, seen from St. Joseph Street, around 1925. (Archives nationales du Québec à Chicoutimi [hereafter ANQC], SHS Colln.)

b y L u c N o p p e n

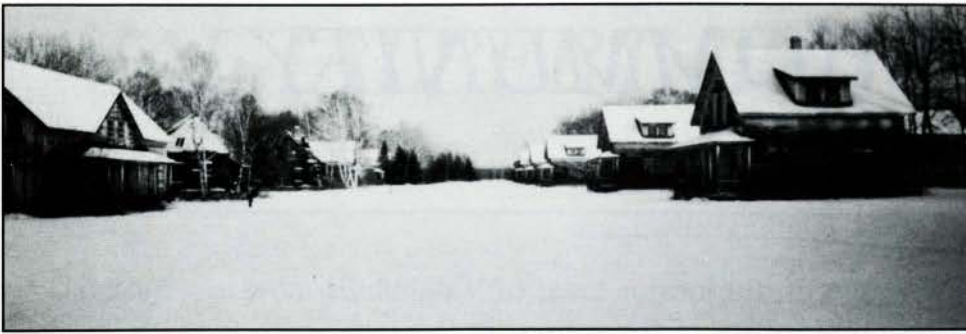


Figure 1 (above). Val-Jalbert. Tremblay Avenue in winter. (Luc Noppen)



Figure 2 (above right). Val-Jalbert. View of the plant and the few existing buildings of the *Compagnie de Pulpe Ouiatchouan*, taken at the opening ceremonies in 1902. (ANQC, SHS Colln.)

**I** maintained from the outset that Val-Jalbert had considerable untapped potential. First and foremost this was an industrial site, and many elements and vestiges remained in place, such as a mill with barkers, grinders, and several machine tools for the production of groundwood pulp. But the site also happens to be located in a setting of rare natural beauty. The Ouiatchouan River, which flows into the Lac-Saint-Jean basin from a height of 236 feet, carves out a spectacular canyon as it nears the abandoned village. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Val-Jalbert has the potential to be for Québec what New Lanark is for Great Britain. In both cases, visitors can witness the unfolding of industrial life in a delightful setting.

But that is not all. The settlement of Val-Jalbert was abandoned by its inhabitants in 1927, when the company operating the mill decided to shut it down. The townsite that had only recently been established was frozen in time, before “tidying up” and the typical evolution of human settlements could leave their mark: the roads had not been paved in asphalt, there were no service stations, and aluminium windows were unheard of in Val-Jalbert. Except for the damage inflicted on the wooden structures by the elements, the village’s original state has remained extraordinarily unchanged.

#### **Damase Jalbert’s establishment (1901-1904): a pulp mill in the forest**

Val-Jalbert began as an industrial site around which a village grew. In 1899, the government of the province of Québec made a list of all the resources of the Lac-Saint-Jean hydrographic basin. Their study described the forests and the hydraulic potential of the waterways, with a view to promoting industrial development. Damase Jalbert, who already owned a sawmill and several forest limits elsewhere, took an interest in the Ouiatchouan River, which flowed into the lake just east of Roberval. The site was not unknown: plans had been prepared in 1866 to locate the terminus of a railway linking Québec City to Lac-Saint-Jean there, as well as a luxury hotel for wealthy vacationers. But in the end the station was built several kilometres to the east in Chambord, and the hotel about the same distance to the west, in Roberval. The only development at the Ouiatchouan River in the next few years was a flour mill and a sawmill.

In 1901, Jalbert purchased the property and founded *La Compagnie de Pulpe Ouiatchouan*, using capital raised in the region and in Québec City. When the elite of the region were invited to the opening ceremonies in August 1902, a photographer took the very first pictures ever of the Ouiatchouan Falls establishment (figure 2). The site was somewhat disorganized, but a plan prepared by insurance agent C.-H. Dumais made its layout a little clearer: at the far end was the factory with the pulp frames and presses; down below, at the foot of the falls, was the building with the turbine-run grinders; to the left was the debarking room; closer up were the company offices and the repair shops; and on the right was the only housing on the site, a boarding house.

The employees hired by Damase Jalbert were residents of the region. In fact, 30 local farmers were among the shareholders of the company, and a number of them earned their shares by working on the construction site. The workers spent the winter felling trees in the forest, the spring working at the wood drive, and the summer working at the plant. Ouiatchouan was a seasonal operation, and the workers more-or-less followed the raw material as it went through its process of transformation.

#### **The Ouiatchouan Falls Paper Company, a typical North American mill town**

Damase Jalbert died in 1904. It appears that the company never did manage to turn a profit, and his debts, along with his shares, were taken over by American concerns. They created the Ouiatchouan Falls Paper Company and planned to enlarge the site, to reorganize production, and, more importantly, to produce paper at the site.

1 There were several articles in the review *Saguenayensia*, as well as Russel Bouchard’s pamphlet *Val-Jalbert: Un village-usine au royaume de la pulpe* (Chicoutimi, Qué.: Société historique du Saguenay, 1986).

2 Luc Noppen and Bergeron Gagnon Inc., “Plan de conservation et de mise en valeur du Village historique de Val-Jalbert,” prepared for the Town of Chambord/Société des établissements en plein air du Québec, April 1994.



Figure 3 (above left and above centre). Val-Jalbert. Panoramic view in two shots of the Ouiatchouan Falls Paper Co. site in 1909. (ANQC, J.-E. Lemay Colln.)

Figure 4 (above). Val-Jalbert. View from the top of the falls showing the entire Ouiatchouan Falls Paper Co. site as it stood in 1909. (ANQC, J.-E. Lemay Colln.)

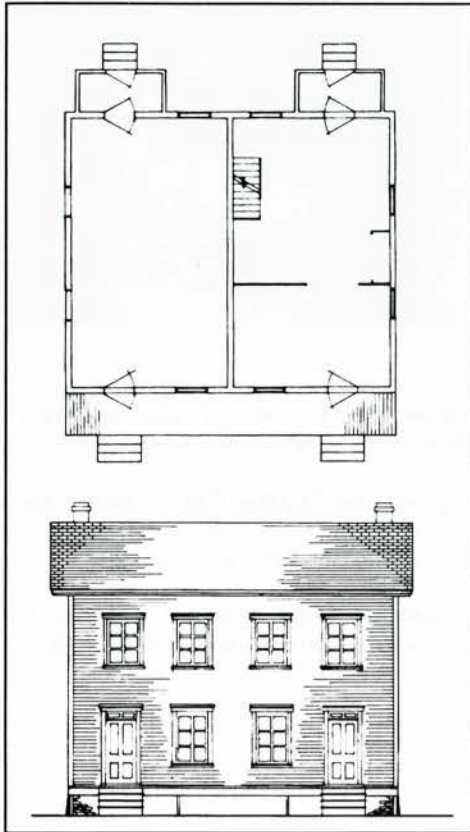
Figure 5 (left). Val-Jalbert. Part of St. George Street, with five semi-detached houses, about 1910. (ANQC, SHS Colln.)



As was the custom in mill towns in the eastern United States, the company decided to build housing for the foremen and the skilled workers they hoped to keep on as permanent staff. Four semi-detached houses typical of workers' homes of the period and a small chapel were built around the esplanade in front of the plant. This expansion and an economic downturn, however, placed the company in a difficult financial position. In fact, the assets of the Ouiatchouan Falls Paper Company were to be auctioned off in 1909. The main creditors commissioned a reportage by photographer Joseph-Eudore Lemay, who in three images documented the whole establishment as it existed in 1909 (figures 3, 4).

On the verge of being auctioned off, and just minutes before the sale, the manager of the Ouiatchouan Falls Paper Company, Julien-Édouard-Alfred Dubuc, a Chicoutimi industrialist, bought out his partners and made a deal with his bank creditors, considerably reducing the accumulated debt. Dubuc's *Compagnie de Pulpe de Chicoutimi* took control of the business and set about boosting operations at Ouiatchouan Falls. Hearing that the provincial Liberal government would adopt a law taxing the export of raw pulpwood, Dubuc presumed that market prices on Canadian groundwood pulp would rise and make profit possible. To increase the production capacity at Ouiatchouan Falls he began to rebuild the wooden plant in 1910, first by extensions built in stone, then by rebuilding a larger main hall with granite walls and an iron roof framing. New equipment in 1916 completed the installations.

Between 1909 and 1914, Dubuc also invested considerable capital in the construction of a row of workers' houses on St. George Street leading up to the plant (figure 5). He was also responsible for laying out St. Joseph Street on the hillside parallel to St. George, and here he built houses as well (figure 6). By 1913 the company owned a site with fifteen semi-detached houses. Each of these houses consisted of a living room and a kitchen on the main floor with three bedrooms upstairs. From archival information it was determined that these houses were occupied by large families who often took in a boarder to help make ends meet. In many cases the occupants even brought in a loom or other equipment to earn extra income to meet the family's needs.



**Figure 6 (above).** Measured drawings of the "type I" workers' houses built between 1904 and 1914. The four semi-detached houses intended for the foremen were built on the esplanade, opposite the plant; they looked identical to the others, but were larger, allowing for an additional room on each floor. (Drawing by Francis Blouin, architect)

**Figure 7 (above right).** Val-Jalbert. One of the ten "type II" detached houses built on the plateau (Dubuc and Tremblay avenues) in 1916, photographed soon after. These houses resembled the earlier type I houses only in their wooden cladding and colour (pale yellow with green trim); they were single-family units, and more modern, with bathrooms and concrete basements. (ANQC, SHS Colln.)



They kept vegetable gardens not for the convenience or satisfaction of growing one's own food, but out of economic necessity. Dubuc was apparently pleased with these houses, as he went on to build similar ones near the company's Chicoutimi operations (though drastic renovations at this location have left virtually nothing of the original houses).

Members of the Saguenay Chamber of Commerce who visited the site in June 1913 were captivated, as was the local newspaper, *Le Progrès du Saguenay*:

There are about thirty houses, all built on the same plan, on either side of an attractive tree-lined, paved road. The nearby church, the schoolhouse and the rectory are built by the Ouatichouan River, among centuries-old spruce trees; everything breathes happiness and comfort in this pretty spot in the Saguenay Kingdom.<sup>3</sup>

When Dubuc rescued the ailing company, he began by building the same type of structures that had been built since 1904 (figure 10; see pages 4-5). In fact, all the houses designed for the workers in the Lac-Saint-Jean establishment between 1904 and 1914 were reproductions of an American model the Bethlehem Steel Company had been building since 1895 in Sparrow's Point, Maryland.<sup>4</sup>

### The search for a model village

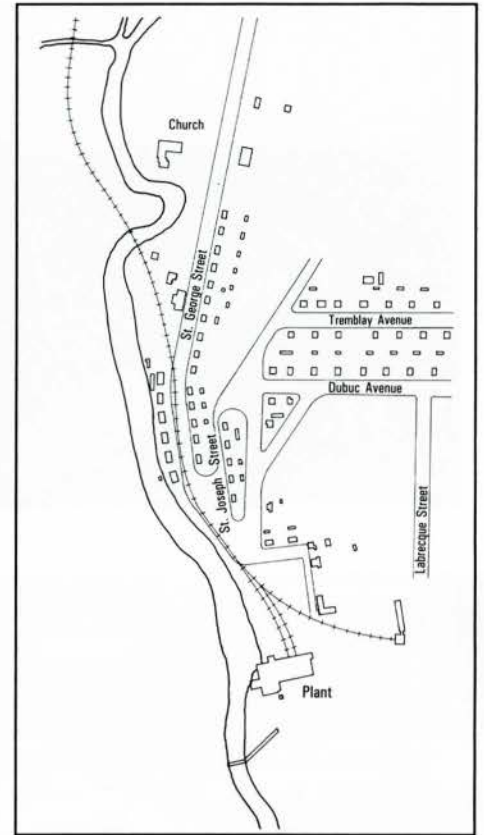
In 1915, Dubuc managed to have his establishment at the foot of the Ouatichouan River Falls elevated to municipal status, and the "village de Val-Jalbert" came into being. By so doing, Dubuc was anticipating the federal government's intention to subsidize the construction and improvement of workers' housing in established municipalities. The houses, which had had electricity from an early date, were thus supplied with running water, and fire hydrants were installed in the streets. At the same time, plans for expansion were underway to accommodate an increase in the number of workers and to provide them with a more urban environment. A convent school was built in 1915 to replace a little school house. The first chapel disappeared as well, to be replaced by a larger one with an impressive adjoining rectory.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Chicoutimi architect Alfred Lamontagne designed a house for the manager of the company, who also happened to be the mayor of the village. Next to it was erected an imposing building that served as both a hotel and a general store. The result was a commercial and institutional district at the entrance to Val-Jalbert, an industrial district at the foot of the falls at the other end of the village, and a residential district located between the two.

In 1916, under pressure from Joseph-Édouard Tremblay, the parish priest, Dubuc agreed to build new houses to replace some of the temporary lodgings located along the river. Fifteen houses designed by Chicoutimi architect Ludger Cimon were built on the plateau, on two new streets named after Dubuc and Tremblay. These houses represented the second type of housing built in Val-Jalbert, and showed definite advances in housing in the village (figure 7). They were detached homes, with an entrance hall separate from the living room, and four bedrooms plus a bathroom upstairs. Again, the building type was inspired by American practices. The general plan of this

3 *Le Progrès du Saguenay*, 26 June 1913.

4 Illustrated in Margaret Crawford, *Building the Workman's Paradise: The Design of American Company Towns* (London and New York: Verso, 1995), 53.

5 The church burned down and was replaced in 1924 by a larger one, designed by architect Alfred Lamontagne. It was dismantled in 1932 and its materials used to build a new church in Saint-Edmond-des-Plaines.



type of worker's house was created by American architect Stanford White for the Niagara Power Company at Echota, New York, in 1892.<sup>6</sup> The company managers, on a visit to the site in 1917, said they were delighted with what they saw and pronounced the houses "quite satisfactory."

Plans from this period give an idea of the intentions of those who laid out this new model town. St. Joseph Street was to be extended up to a square, creating, for all intents and purposes, a gateway to the plateau (figure 8). There would then be a grid of streets crossing at 135-degree angles so that, if the town grew, construction on the plateau would be carried out towards the north, rather than the east, where the company's property narrowed.

Dubuc's town planning experience at Val-Jalbert served him well. In 1917 he founded Port-Alfred around the new Ha! Ha! Bay Sulphite Plant. On a flat site that sloped towards a vast body of water, the industrialist commissioned a checkerboard plan opposite the plant and the port facilities on Ha! Ha! Bay. In the foreground there was a commercial street. In the middle distance was an institutional centre, where the church, town hall, and school would be later be built. When the Canadian government first adopted regulations providing subsidies for the construction of workers' housing in May 1918, Port-Alfred's company houses sprang up in a matter of months, with building continuing until 1921.

For this purpose, and because of the subsidies, Dubuc had created two companies, *la Société de construction ouvrière* and the Ha! Ha! Bay Land and Building Company.<sup>7</sup> These companies were to buy the land and built the workers' houses in Port-Alfred and Val-Jalbert. In 1919, the Ha! Ha! Bay Land and Building Company signed an agreement with the municipality of Val-Jalbert to build twenty new detached houses on the plateau. This required the opening of a new street, which was named Labrecque Street, after the bishop. The new type of house (the third type in the sequence) was more 20th-century in character than the previous houses had been. It was a two-storey detached house, built on a concrete basement, covered in cedar shingles, with a articulated volume uncharacteristic of the earlier houses (figure 9). It was a building type inspired by one of Grosvenor Atterbury's six "American" cottages designed for Indian Hill, Worcester, in 1915.<sup>8</sup>

The houses were larger than the previous types, but the degree of comfort they offered was left to the occupants. The ground floor, which did without an entrance hall by placing the stairway in front of the entrance, was divided into three rooms—a spacious family room plus two other rooms that most residents rented to roomers. Upstairs, there were three bedrooms and a large bathroom.

The fourth and last housing type built in Val-Jalbert replaced the last camps on the river and filled a few empty lots on the plateau, in 1923-24 (figure 11). Chicoutimi architect Alfred Lamontagne had originally designed the last two housing types for Port-Alfred, but it was quite natural for the Ha! Ha! Bay Land and Building Company to use the same models at Val-Jalbert.<sup>9</sup> This time the company went back to building semi-detached houses, to save money. At any rate, the "type III" houses had been criticized

Figure 8 (above). Val-Jalbert in 1927. Layout of the buildings and the cadastral lots of Val-Jalbert. (Drawing by Alain Caron from a map in ANQC, MLCP Colln.)

Figure 9 (above left). Val-Jalbert. One of the twenty "type III" detached houses designed by the architect Alfred Lamontagne and built by the Ha! Ha! Bay Land and Building Co. in 1919-20. This house, like several others on the site, was restored under the supervision of Philippe-Auguste Morin, manager of the historic village. (Luc Noppen)

6 Illustrated in Crawford, 80.

7 The *Société de construction ouvrière* was incorporated in 1909 for the sole purpose, it appears, of land speculation, including the development site of Port-Alfred, while the Ha! Ha! Bay Land and Building Co., incorporated in 1919, seems to have been established for the specific purpose of building workers' housing at Port-Alfred and Val-Jalbert.

8 Illustrated in Crawford, 114. Alfred Lamontagne also designed a larger version of this type for the manager of the company, who also acted as mayor of Val-Jalbert. This building, which disappeared years ago, was located at the village entrance close to the convent and the rectory. Its plans are in the Archives nationales du Québec à Chicoutimi, fonds Gravel.

9 Fortunately so, as the structures in the abandoned village are easier to study. The houses in Port-Alfred were substantially modified after they were sold off to their occupants. In fact, we were able to recognize the features of the houses in the Saguenay industrial settlement only because we had had the opportunity to make a precise identification of the characteristics of the Val-Jalbert houses beforehand.

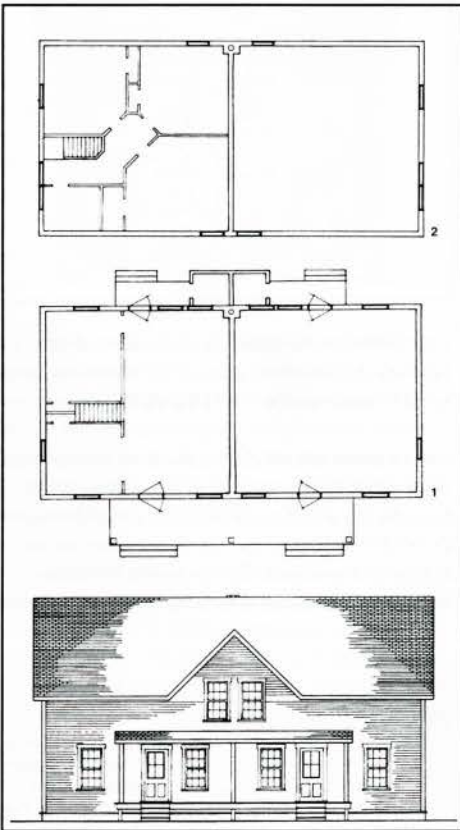
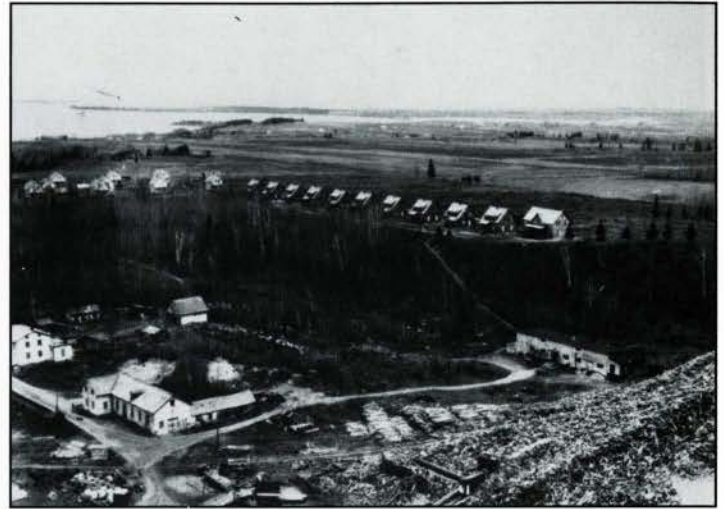
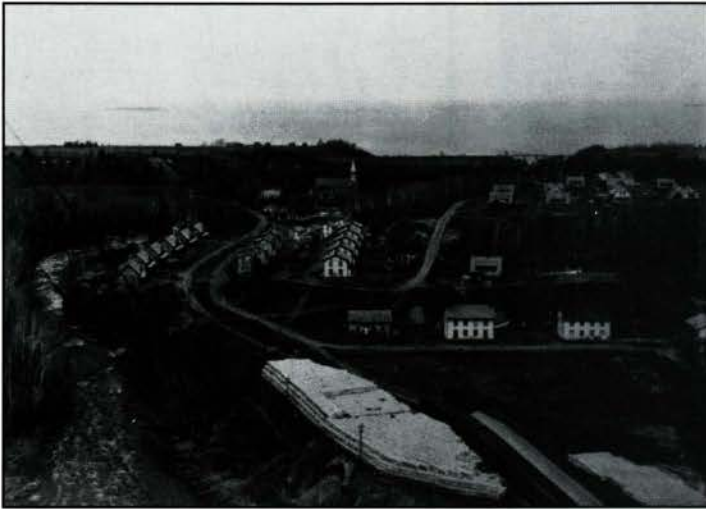


Figure 11 (above). Measured drawings of the “type IV” workers’ houses. A number were burned down in the 1960s by novice firefighters as part of their training. The original drawings are in the Gravel Collection, ANQC. (Drawing by Francis Blouin, architect)

Figure 12 (top). Val-Jalbert. Panoramic view taken in two photographs by J.E. Chabot, about 1925. (ANQC, SHS Colln.)

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because of their excessively high rents. The new “type IV” house was planned to make the best possible use of all the liveable space. The stairwell was placed between two bedrooms on the main floor, its central position eliminating the need for a hallway upstairs, where the bedrooms were larger and the bathroom smaller than in the “type III” house.

### The end of a dream

Dubuc was ousted from the company in 1924 when it once again encountered serious financial difficulty. The Val-Jalbert plant shut down in 1924, just as the new houses were completed; some of the “type IV” houses were never inhabited. Activities would resume the following year under the management of a committee of creditors, but at a much diminished level. A new company, the Quebec Pulp and Paper Mills, was founded in 1925 to re-launch activities at both Val-Jalbert and Chicoutimi. It was unsuccessful. The plant at Val-Jalbert shut down for the second time in 1927, this time for good. Two years later, all the company houses were empty. The church was dismantled and rebuilt elsewhere, and the school was closed in 1930.

The Val-Jalbert plant had failed because the competing Price Brothers Company had set up operations with modern technology in Riverbend (Alma) and in Kenogami (Jonquière), and the St. Lawrence Paper Company had just opened a huge plant in Dolbeau. These paper mills, using hydroelectric power harnessed from the Saguenay River, began a new era in the Saguenay–Lac-Saint-Jean region. It was an era of large-scale American capital investments that would contribute to Québec’s economic expansion by producing paper and aluminium in Québec for worldwide markets. The very scale of these enterprises doomed the model of Val-Jalbert, just as it had destroyed the pulp mills in Jonquière and Chicoutimi. In both towns, the workers’ houses were subsumed into the infrastructure of communities whose vocation had changed. In other places, like Saint-Cyriac, the workers’ village was destroyed when the level of Lake Kenogami was raised to build a new dam. Val-Jalbert survived all these upheavals to become an unique testimonial to the first phase of the industrialization of the Saguenay–Lac-Saint-Jean region: no original vestiges remain elsewhere.

AS IF TO PRESERVE THIS HISTORY FOR POSTERITY, a photographer captured Val-Jalbert in its last complete state (figure 12). In the foreground of this magnificent panoramic shot taken about 1925 can be seen Damase Jalbert’s establishment: the esplanade in front of the plant, the factory buildings, and the foremen’s semi-detached houses. Farther back, to the left, the Quiatchouan Falls mill town extends along St. George Street. And finally, on the plateau, are the houses of Dubuc’s model village, his pride and joy.

The Québec government seized the site in 1942 for unpaid taxes, and later opened it to the public as a curiosity. Now they intend to classify it as a historic site as a means of assuring its preservation. This is a reassurance for historians; this precious documentary source, whose original state, untouched by passing trends, fosters the understanding of industrialization in its entirety, will be safeguarded for future generations.