

JEAN-PIERRE GIRARD



# 100 YEARS OF COOPERATION

F I D E S





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**100 YEARS  
OF COOPERATION**

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## **GHISLAIN GERVAIS**

**President**

The 100-year story of Sollio Cooperative Group is, first and foremost, a story about people. It is the story of the women, men and families from all over Quebec—and now, all over Canada—who joined forces to support our most essential mission: to feed people.

This book tells the story not only of Sollio Cooperative Group but also of Quebec, whose development and growth mirrored our own. These last 100 years of transformations, tests and triumphs have all shaped our organization. And despite all the changes and the incredible growth that we have achieved since our founding in 1922, our cooperative spirit has always been the same.

Our love of cooperation and cooperative values is as fundamental as our passion for agriculture, passed down through families from generation to generation. Those who believe in cooperation know that it is more than just a business model—it is a way of life. Cooperation is ingrained in all of us, and it is through the cooperative model that we will build a sustainable future for generations to come.

In our 100 years of existence, we have made and continue to make our mark on Quebec, and every day, our reach extends further across Canada. We certainly have much to be proud of!

I am delighted to invite you to read on and discover our shared history through this wonderful book.





## **PASCAL HOULE, CPA**

### **Chief executive officer**

Few are lucky enough to lead an organization as it celebrates its 100th anniversary. It is an honour and a privilege to be part of this important milestone in the history of our remarkable organization.

I discovered the cooperative world at the very beginning of my career and have never looked back. I have had the chance to grow alongside Sollio Cooperative Group for the last quarter of a century. What amazed me about the cooperative world and about Sollio Cooperative Group—and what still amazes me after 25 years—is its capacity to leverage the strengths of an entire network as one. In my opinion, this is also precisely what makes cooperation a strong and sensible business model. Together, we are stronger, more resilient and more capable.

These 100 years of Sollio Cooperative Group tell a story that unites us all. It is a story that we are still writing together today, one that still has surprises in store. It is also a story of the incredible solidarity that has emerged throughout our network—solidarity that, now more than ever, is at the core of everything we do.

The last century has brought its fair share of challenges, but at Sollio Cooperative Group, we have always been known for our ability to bounce back, all while staying true to ourselves. Times may change, but who we are remains the same. We are caring and courageous. We are a cooperative, and our values are deeply rooted.

This book celebrates all that we have learned and accomplished in the last 100 years. It is a testament to our impact, and I hope it will continue to inspire us for another 100 years to come!

# ABBREVIATIONS

<b>ICA</b>	International Cooperative Alliance
<b>CMC</b>	Co-Operatives and Mutuals Canada
<b>QCCM</b>	Conseil québécois de la coopération et de la mutualité (Quebec Council of Cooperation and Mutuality)
<b>CRF</b>	Cooperative Research Farms
<b>CSN</b>	Confédération des syndicats nationaux (Confederation of National Unions)
<b>CUMA</b>	Coopérative d'utilisateurs de matériel agricole (Agricultural Equipment Users' Cooperative)
<b>GATT</b>	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
<b>WTO</b>	World Trade Organization
<b>SCA</b>	Société coopérative agricole (Cooperative Agricultural Association)
<b>UCC</b>	Union catholique des cultivateurs (Catholic Farmers' Union)
<b>UPA</b>	Union des producteurs agricoles (Farmers' Union)

## READING GUIDE

As you may imagine, many things can change over 100 years. To facilitate reading and comprehension, here are a few important points of reference.

**1922**

Société coopérative  
fédérée des agriculteurs  
de la province  
de Québec

**1924**

The logo for Fédérée, featuring the word "Fédérée" in a stylized, cursive script.

**1968**

The logo for Coopérative fédérée de Québec, featuring a stylized "CF" monogram above the text "COOPÉRATIVE FÉDÉRÉE DE QUÉBEC".

**2004**

The logo for La Coop fédérée, featuring the text "La Coop" in a bold, sans-serif font above "FÉDÉRÉE" in a smaller font, with a stylized green wave graphic below.

**2008**

The logo for La Coop fédérée, featuring the text "La Coop" in a bold, sans-serif font above "fédérée" in a smaller font, with a stylized green wave graphic below.

**2020**

The logo for Sollio Groupe Coopératif, featuring a stylized green and yellow circular graphic above the text "Sollio" in a bold, sans-serif font, with "Groupe Coopératif" in a smaller font below.

In order to soften the content, we use the name Sollio throughout the period covered. However, we respect the quotes that use either of the names of the organization since its foundation.

### **The name of the organization**

Sollio Cooperative Group has been the organization's official name since 2020. Upon its founding in 1922, it was called the Société coopérative fédérée des agriculteurs de la province de Québec. Shortly after, it changed its name to the Coopérative fédérée de Québec (CFQ) and kept this name until 2004. From its founding until the 1960s, it was also commonly known as the "Central." This name references the status of the three cooperatives that formed the organization in 1922. From 2004 to 2020, the organization was called "La Coop fédérée," or was simply known as "La Fédérée" or "La Coop."

### **Le Coopérateur**

Since 1972, *Coopérateur* has been the magazine of Sollio Cooperative Group. Its mission is to promote cooperation, share cutting-edge technological and economic information, and cover the major issues in farming and agri-food at home and abroad. Reading this official Sollio publication is crucial for following the development of the organization.

## INSPIRATION FOR THIS BOOK

The main sources for this book are two documents written by historian Jacques Saint-Pierre, who conducted documentary research and identified living stakeholders. Mr. Saint-Pierre consulted dozens of archives and carried out numerous interviews. *Histoire de la Coopérative fédérée* was published in 1997 by Presses de l'Université Laval and Éditions de l'IQRC. *L'industrie de la terre* recounts 75 years of the organization's history. An unpublished manuscript submitted in 2021<sup>1</sup> covered the period from 1990 to 2020 and some of 2021. This book is a summary of this remarkable, in-depth work. It therefore cites Saint-Pierre and his sources on numerous occasions. In this book, the quoted text is from Saint-Pierre's work unless otherwise indicated. This was done to save space in the notes.

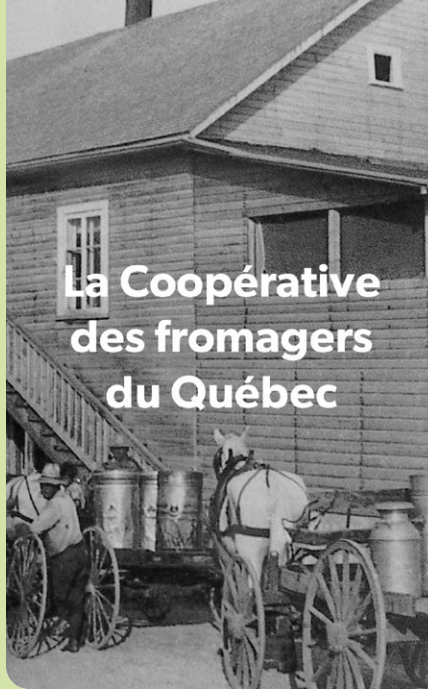


### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## JEAN-PIERRE GIRARD

Jean-Pierre Girard is an international advisor in collective entrepreneurship with over 40 years of experience consulting, teaching and conducting university research in this field, both in Canada and internationally. He has contributed to roughly a dozen books on the subject of cooperatives and written a chapter in the first edition of the *Encyclopedia of the Social and Solidarity Economy* (2023), an initiative of the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy. His educational background includes degrees in history and the management of cooperative organizations.

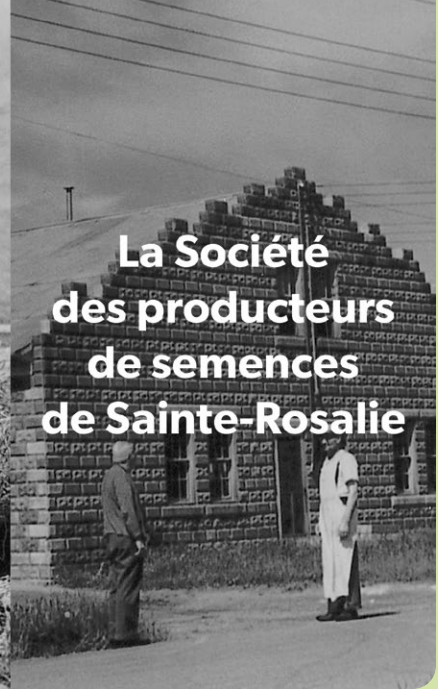




**La Coopérative  
des fromagers  
du Québec**



**Le Comptoir  
coopératif  
de Montréal**



**La Société  
des producteurs  
de semences  
de Sainte-Rosalie**

## INTRODUCTION

This book tells the story of the first hundred years of Sollio Cooperative Group, a collective enterprise that operates in a consequential sector for modern society: agri-food. On October 31, 1922, 200 people gathered in a room at City Hall in Quebec City. They were there for an assembly to merge three central cooperatives, forming the *Société coopérative fédérée des agriculteurs de la province de Québec*. No one could have imagined that 100 years later, this unique cooperative would become a pan-Canadian business with 50 affiliated cooperatives from six provinces and 45 auxiliary members. Nor could they have foreseen that the cooperative would be involved in on-farm supply,

pork and poultry processing and marketing, and retail sales across a vast hardware chain. Sollio employs over 15,850 people and makes an undeniable contribution to the economies of Quebec and Canada. With an annual business volume of \$8.3 billion, it ranks 104<sup>th</sup> among the world's 300 largest cooperatives.

Sollio has forged its path by placing the needs of its members at the heart of its business model for 100 years. Since the organization was founded in 1922, its primary motivation has not been an obsession with maximizing quarterly performance. Rather, it focuses on making sure that all

investments, acquisitions, closures, asset sales, and other management decisions are in the interest of its member farmers.

The ambition is simple; making it a reality is a challenge. Through Sollio, and specifically the agricultural coopera-

tive network, farmers have control over the go-betweens that are necessary to carry out daily business: on-farm supply of fertilizer and seeds to support production, harvests, and the sale of crops, pork, poultry, and more.

## From 1922 to 2022

This long journey has not been a linear one. It has been punctuated with tradition, innovation, new initiatives, business partnerships and mergers, as well as division, rationalization plans, closures, and sales of facilities and assets. A key through line is the organization's ability to manage tensions, and sometimes discord, among multiple stakeholders.

Sollio's development has been a complex challenge. Throughout its long history, the organization has had to reconcile two identities. On one hand, it is a company with economic imperatives. On the other, it comprises cooperatives that have their own growth challenges. In short, it is a federation that must remain in sync with its members' needs while ensuring sound and dynamic governance. The dual status of member/user (or owner/user) is truly unique to the cooperative model. As such, the quality and strength of the democratic process is a key factor of success. In order for their expectations to be understood, members must not hesitate to express themselves. They must feel empowered to influence and guide the organization.

Sollio's history also demonstrates exemplary resilience and steadfastness over the decades. Sollio has stayed true to a cooperative model even as other large agricultural cooperatives in Canada have demutualized, as was the fate of Agrifoods International, Agricore United and the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, for instance. The survival of a cooperative is therefore not to be taken for granted. It requires agility and courageous decision-making. Since its beginnings, Sollio's path has been forged through the ideas, power, influence, vision, and leadership of many diverse actors.

Over one hundred years, Sollio's development has mirrored that of the agri-food industry in Quebec. This development has required expertise, know-how, and the sharing of agricultural best practices: a process that undergoes constant renewal. Sollio is far from alone in this endeavour. It is the joint effort of agricultural cooperatives, provincial and federal agriculture ministries, the farm union movement, farmers' federations, and the agricultural schools and faculties that have educated generations of agronomists, not to mention veterinary medicine faculties and various research centres.

## 100 years of farming technology

Farmers have always taken a keen interest in new technology and developments. It is no surprise that over the past century, they went from working their fields with horsepower to using cutting-edge—and sometimes self-driving—modern tractors. Over the same period, the number of farms in Quebec decreased significantly. Farms grew in size, and rural areas lost population. With fewer hands available to work on farms, new solutions were necessary.

This challenge remains today. A dwindling number of farmers are now tasked with sustainably feeding a planet that will house nearly 10 billion people by 2050. They must do so in the face of climate change and the need to double their crop yields.



This book focuses on the history of Sollio, agricultural cooperatives, and the agri-food business. However, it also tells the story of Quebec society and the movements that shaped its development. Phenomena such as the omnipresence of the clergy, urbanization, the electrification of rural areas, and the Quiet Revolution all influenced agricultural practices. At times, Sollio itself became a national leader by adopting forward-looking practices.

# 1

## THE ORIGINS OF SOLLIO (1900–1922)

### Foundations

Beginning in the late 1800s, individuals sought to make agriculture more efficient and to move away from subsistence farming. Two types of groups emerged: syndicates of producers and farmers' clubs. Syndicates formed of the owners of butter and cheese-making operations and other dairy businesses established an inspection service and a corps of visiting professors to transfer knowledge. Meanwhile, farmers' clubs became a way to connect with farmers, as these clubs were now established within parishes rather than at the county level. The creation of these groups led to the adoption of an 1893 act that proposed a program of government subsidies to "partially cover the costs of farm implements (such as clover hullers and scalpels), breeding stock, and seed grain."

The role of agricultural schools was crucial to the agricultural development that led to the formation of Sollio. Schools were founded in Saint-Hyacinthe and Oka in the space of one year, in 1892 and 1893. Another school had been established in Saint-Anne-de-la-Pocatière in 1859 by the abbot François Pilote. It was the first agricultural school in Canada and the first such school in North America to give instruction in French.



In the 1890s, the European cooperative model was seen as a source of inspiration for finding solutions to issues of rural organization. At the beginning of the 1900s, the government sought to legislate on the subject of cooperatives. However, it was only in 1908 that a custom-made law for agricultural cooperatives was adopted, providing a framework for all aspects of farming.

The number of cooperatives shot up, from 149 in 1916 to 306 in 1920. The excitement for cooperatives was spurred by the work of propagandists, a group of priests, agronomists, and industry players who had the support of the Quebec government and urged farmers to adopt the cooperative business model.

In 1920, 75% of 157 active cooperatives were carrying out pooled purchases, and approximately 40% worked to sell their members' products. The sustained increase in the number of agricultural cooperatives illustrated the importance of a collective approach.

Between 1910 and 1914, the formation of three large central cooperatives laid the foundation for what would become the *Société coopérative fédérée des agriculteurs de la province de Québec (Sollio Cooperative Group)*. These cooperatives included both individual members and farmers' associations such as agricultural cooperatives.





Joseph-Édouard Caron, Minister of Agriculture from 1909 to 1929.



The Perron de Saint-Prime cheese factory c. 1935. Adélarde Perron, dynasty forebear, was one of the founding members of the SCA des fromagers de Québec.

Boxes of cheese for the UK market.

The head office of the SCA des fromagers de Québec on William Street in Montreal.

## Société coopérative agricole des fromagers de Québec (1910–1922)

The largest of these cooperatives was the Société coopérative agricole des fromagers de Québec, founded in 1910. Its mandate reflected the Ministry of Agriculture's expectations for the improved organization of the cheese trading sector. The cooperative's mission was clear: to fight back against the go-betweens who scoured the countryside to purchase cheese from farmers at low prices. Its manager at the time, Auguste Trudel, travelled to England to forge new business relationships. A few years later, this trip would lead to the direct sale of Quebec cheese. The numbers speak for themselves: "In 1920, the cooperative shipped 13.5 million pounds of cheese marked 'Quebec' to England. This constituted 77% of the total volume it brought to market. A total of 74% of this exported cheese was of premium quality."

The cooperative did not limit itself to the dairy trade. Beginning in 1914, it branched out and began selling other agricultural products, including eggs and poultry. For the latter, farmers were advised by government poultry instructors to learn the best poultry preparation methods.<sup>2</sup> Also in 1914, the cooperative began trading in meat. By 1916, it was managing two abattoirs: one in Saint-Vallier and another in Princeville. Teaching students at the Oka and Sainte-Anne-de-la-Pocatière agricultural schools, A. Hensen, a Danish specialist who had experience in the cooperative movement in Denmark, was hired by the government. He shared his expertise in bacon making and pig feeding and farming.

In 1919, provincial Minister of Agriculture Joseph-Édouard Caron encouraged cooperative abattoirs to centralize, which led the cooperative to acquire the Princeville facility. It became an outpost in the region and accepted any animal that was delivered to it. Still today, Olymel owns a facility in Princeville, where it butchers and de-bones pigs.



The cooperative's manager was granted significant freedom by the board, but the Department of Agriculture kept a close eye on the organization's activities. Its accounts were audited by accountant J.-Arthur Paquet, and the minister generally attended board meetings. Concerningly, the department's proximity to the cooperative went one step further in 1920. Before the charter for the Coopérative centrale des agriculteurs de Québec (a new name imposed by the minister) was adopted, a last-minute provision was added that gave the minister the right to put the cooperative into trusteeship. What happened next leaves no room for interpretation. As tensions flared, the minister removed all members of management from their positions and replaced them with his supporters.<sup>3</sup>

In 1920, the cooperative boasted annual revenues of \$10 million. It brought one quarter of the province's dairy products to market, along with a significant percentage of other products sold by Quebec farmers.



In 1915, the Princeville slaughterhouse became the first cooperative slaughterhouse in North America.

► First congrès des coopérateurs in Oka, 1916.





## Comptoir coopératif de Montréal (1913–1922)

This central cooperative was founded to “facilitate the purchase of goods of professional utility by farmers.” It was not an initiative of the Department of Agriculture, but rather of a group of monks who worked in farming. During a discussion between the Union, the Société de pomologie de la province de Québec, and the Association des maraîchers de Montréal, Father Alphonse Bellemare, provincial procurator of the Jesuits, proposed founding a social endeavour rather than a solely commercial enterprise. The cooperative took its inspiration from the “system of European professional associations, especially the Belgian Boerenbond.”<sup>4</sup>

Founded on January 27, 1913, the Comptoir coopératif de Montréal had the “[...] general goal of working towards the religious, intellectual, social and economic progress of its members, taking their material interests to heart.”<sup>5</sup>

Located in Montreal, the Comptoir established its place of business at 1135 Papineau Avenue,<sup>6</sup> not far from the future Jacques-Cartier Bridge. It sold seed grain, flour, and food and chemical fertilizers to farmers. It also sold a variety of private label products such as herbicides, insecticides, and paint.

The cooperative had 2,600 members, but with the incorporation of clubs, its network included 20,000 farmers, giving it enviable reach. However, the Comptoir drew its membership from the same farmers as the SCA des fromagers. Over time, this was seen as an unnecessary duplication of costs.

The cooperative saw itself as complementing the work of credit unions and aspired to become a federation of agricultural cooperatives that conducted both sales and purchases. In reality, however, it was largely unable to play the second role (buying from farmers), unlike the SCA des fromagers. With 16 employees in 1919, the cooperative had annual sales of \$500,000.



Le Comptoir Coopératif de Montréal		
BILAN		
Au 31 Décembre 1921		
ACTIF		
En caisse et en banque	\$ 2,682.43	
Comptes recevables	26,590.43	
Inventaire-marchandises	25,842.79	\$55,115.65
Machines, outillage, bidons, caisses et bouteilles à lait	12,460.30	
Ameublement et agencement	5,139.73	
Chevaux, voitures et harnais, et constructions	4,646.25	
	22,246.28	
	6,577.99	
Moins : Dépréciations-amortissements		15,668.29
		20.00
Actions-Coopérative Centrale des Agriculteurs		
Dépenses différées : Assurances, taxes à courtir, réparations d'entrepôt, organisation et propagande, ...		20,578.14
		\$91,382.08



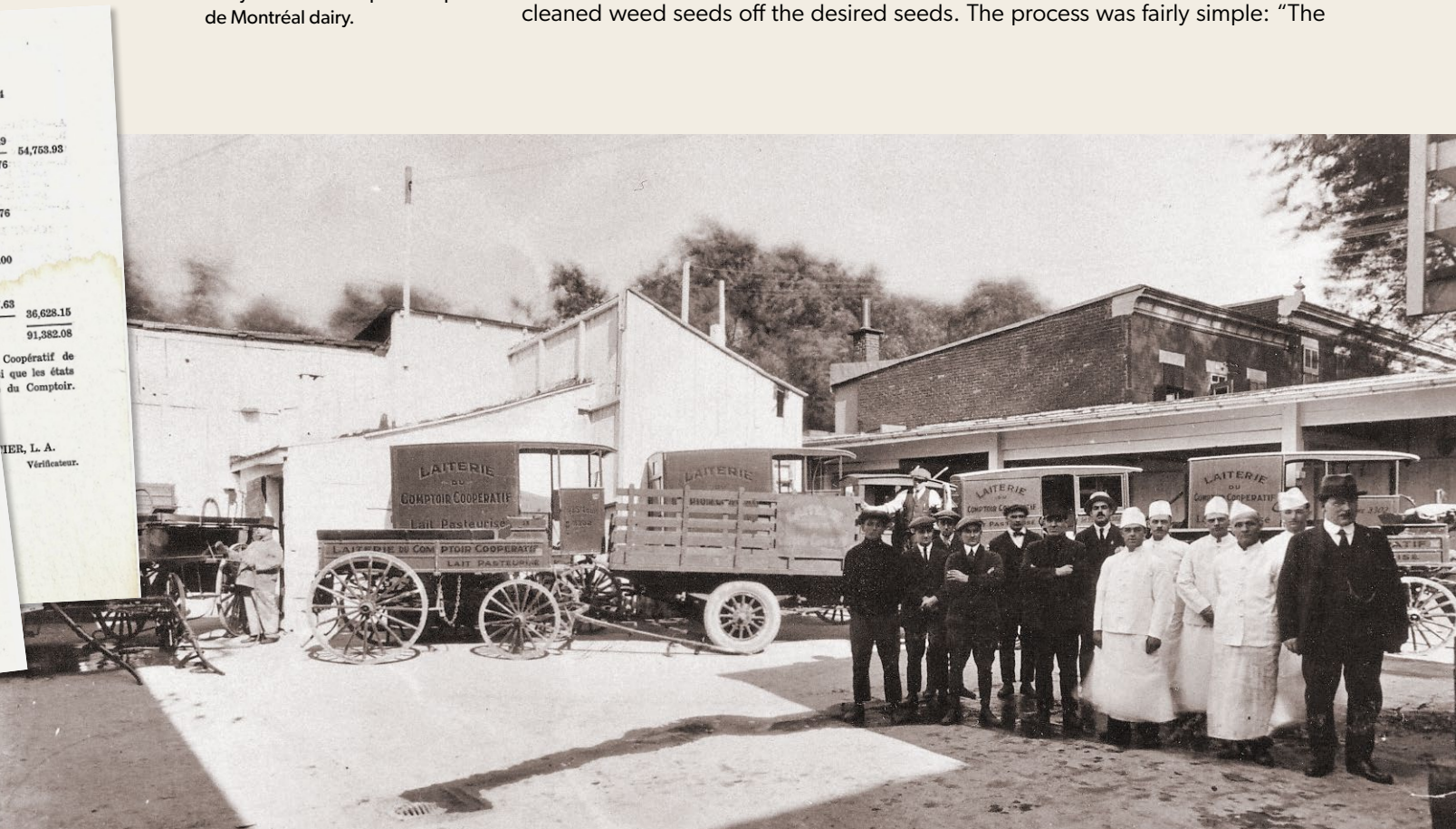
Georges-Auguste Gigault, Deputy Minister of Agriculture from 1912 to 1915.

The yard at the Comptoir coopératif de Montréal dairy.

## Coopérative des producteurs de semences de Québec (1914-1922)

This central cooperative was founded to improve the yield of field crops. The quality of seeds available in Quebec in the early 1910s left much to be desired. As a result, farmers bought their seeds from abroad. They had no control over the cost or quality. This situation was familiar to Louis Lavallée, a farmer from Saint-Guillaume de Yamaska, who was employed by the Department of Agriculture for Canada as a seed inspector. He proposed founding a farmers' cooperative with the aim of producing quality seeds. His initiative was facilitated by the support of Deputy Minister Gigault. In November 1914, an initial meeting was held in Sainte-Rosalie to lay the foundations of the project. It was followed one month later by the founding assembly of the Coopérative des producteurs de semences de Québec. The assembly was attended by 29 "farmers and friends of the agricultural class."<sup>7</sup>

The cooperative purchased a warehouse and a mill in Sainte-Rosalie, initially using a scalper borrowed from the government, then buying its own. This machine cleaned weed seeds off the desired seeds. The process was fairly simple: "The





grain (especially oats) bought from members, farmers and even traders [was] resold to individuals or to agricultural organizations, clubs, associations and cooperatives.”

Warehouse of seed grains in Sainte-Rosalie. – Property of Société Coopérative Agricole des Producteurs de Semences.

It was a smaller cooperative, with 800 members in 1922 and only four employees in 1919. However, it achieved its goal by helping reduce seed imports, which benefited local producers.<sup>8</sup> By “facilitating the purchase of acclimated and pedigreed seeds, it also helped increase the productivity of grain fields.” The “most influential” of its leaders was Arsène Denis. Following the intervention of Minister Caron, Denis became president of the cooperative in February 1922<sup>9</sup> before becoming Sollio’s first president. While the cooperative received major financial and technical support from the Department of Agriculture, it did so in exchange for its own autonomy, as its leaders’ decisions were tightly controlled.

## **The amalgamation of the central cooperatives and the birth of Sollio (1916–1922)**

Clearly, the actions of these three central cooperatives brought improved structure to the farming sector, encouraged the modernization of equipment, consolidated supply chains and sales paths for farmers, and imposed quality standards. Most importantly, they granted a degree of control over their operations to farmers, who were no longer at the mercy of go-betweens motivated solely by profit. These three cooperatives also benefited from orders resulting from the First World War. However, they only reached a portion of the province's 138,000 farm operators. The same farmers were often asked to join multiple central cooperatives, creating competition that benefited no one.

The idea of merging the central cooperatives had been discussed for some time. A first step was taken in the spring of 1922 when agronomist Jean-Baptiste Cloutier, an employee of the Department of Agriculture, attempted to bring the three cooperatives together. The Comptoir coopératif was open to the idea, but nothing appears to have come of it.

The difficult postwar economic period and political tensions, including the entry into politics of Coopérative centrale des agriculteurs manager Auguste Trudel, led Minister Caron, a Liberal, to force the hands of the stakeholders and spur the amalgamation of the three cooperatives in October 1922, in spite of opposition.

On October 21, the management of the three central cooperatives commented on a bill that the minister had prepared. The leaders all agreed to support the bill before their members. Each shareholder in the cooperatives received a proxy ballot to vote in favour of the amalgamation. "The assembly for the amalgamation was scheduled for October 31, 1922, in the recorder's courtroom at City Hall in Quebec City. It was attended by 200 people,<sup>10</sup> including several officers of the Department of Agriculture. Following approval of the terms of the charter of the new association unified by the joint assembly, each of the cooperatives endorsed the decision.<sup>11</sup> As such, the Coopérative fédérée was born."

On December 29, 1922, the *Act to Incorporate La Société Coopérative Fédérée des Agriculteurs de la Province de Québec*<sup>12</sup> received Royal Assent.

# 2

## **SOLLIO'S EARLY YEARS** (1923–1929)

In 1923, once the amalgamation of the three central cooperatives was complete, Sollio was left with the challenge of integrating the resources of the three founding organizations. It also had to respond to its members' needs and bolster the local cooperatives that would form its membership base. These cooperatives had supported farmers during the First World War by helping boost production and improving methods, leading to an enhanced standard of living. However, the unavoidable slowdown in the postwar period was a major source of financial insecurity for farmers. Overproduction, falling prices, debt, and depopulation in favour of cities all battered rural communities. Against this backdrop, the Union catholique des cultivateurs (UCC) was founded in October 1924. Its initiatives included advocating for the introduction of farm credit. The UCC therefore viewed the proximity between Sollio and the Department of Agriculture—and its minister—with a critical eye.

Under the act through which Sollio was founded, the capitalization process was relatively simple: "The shares of the three centrals [were] convertible into shares in the new company and [retained] their nominal value. The authorized capital [was] one million dollars and the value of the shares\* [was] set at ten dollars."

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\*At the time, the word "share," rather than "unit," was used.

The subscription right was limited to agricultural associations (cooperatives, cooperative syndicates, clubs or agricultural societies).

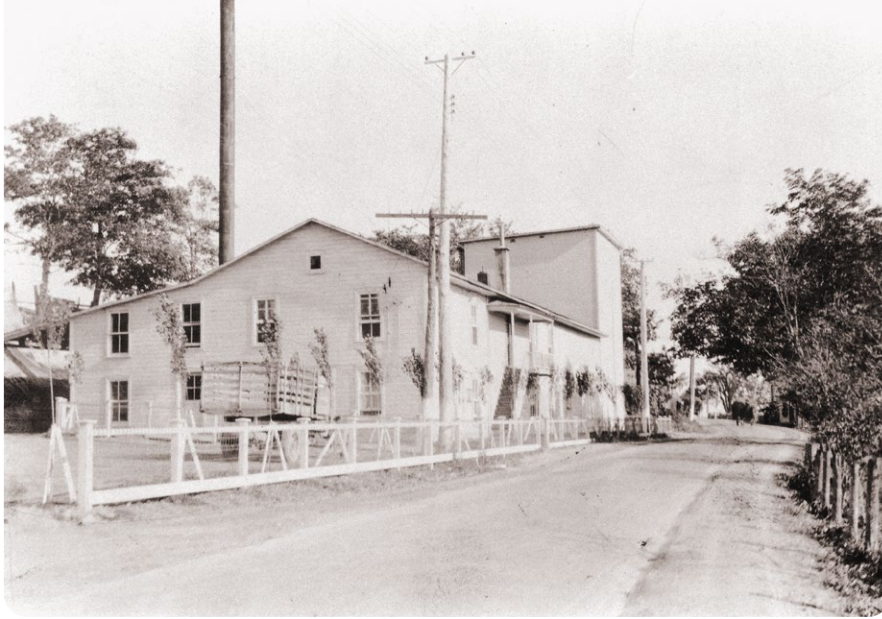
## Administration

The organization's management was composed of the directors of cooperatives, though individual members could also join. It was presided over by Arsène Denis, the first president of Sollio. While the rule of one member, one vote applied to individuals, cooperatives were entitled to one additional vote for each tranche of 10 shares they held. Proxy voting was permitted. The minister's influence was enshrined in provisions of the act. He had a consultative voice on the management team and the executive council. The minister could also appoint a sequestrator over the property of the cooperative.

In addition to serving as president of the executive council, J.-Arthur Paquet was also entrusted with the daily management of the organization as its general manager. Paquet played a key role in the cooperative due to his responsibilities and, undoubtedly, his direct links to his former employer, the Department of Agriculture. Each of the cooperative's outlets also had its own manager. Sollio inherited approximately 100 employees from the amalgamation of the three central cooperatives, most of whom (70 employees) came from the SCA des fromagers. They

The Coopérative fédérée de Québec's dairy department, Montreal, c. 1925.





were joined by seasonal workers, propagandists and outlet staff.<sup>13</sup> Paquet instituted rules for these employees. Punctuality was strictly observed, wages were adjusted in February of each year, and workers were granted one week of vacation and an end-of-year bonus.

## Commercial operations

When its operations began in 1923, Sollio continued the commercial dealings of the three central cooperatives, including on-farm supply and marketing various goods. The organization wasted no time in seizing opportunities to expand its service offering, including the sale of many goods. Its operations spanned multiple regions, and it promoted local products.

The butter and cheese division generated the bulk of the organization's operations. From 1923 to 1929, 45% of total cheese production was processed by Sollio. However, Sollio's share of the butter trade was only 10% during the same period. Sollio developed a reputation for its constant focus on the quality of its dairy products. Working closely with the Department of Agriculture, the cooperative had access to information on the prices paid to the best producers. Its hard work paid off, as the organization received "approximately 80% of superior-quality products from the province's producers."<sup>14</sup>



◀  
Grondines butter factory,  
leased by La Fédérée in 1928.

Saint-Félicien outlet.

Hébertville outlet.

Blueberry market in Roberval.  
(Private collection.)

However, slightly less than 50% of Quebec's 1,450 producers entrusted their goods to the cooperative. A decrease in the number of buyers led Sollio to sell less milk product through Chamber of Commerce of Montreal<sup>15</sup> auctions, until this system came to a close in 1929. The same year, Sollio sold its highest-quality cheese to another cooperative, the Cooperative Wholesale Society of London. It sold the rest through Lovell & Christmas (Canada) Ltd. Butter, meanwhile, was sold "in the local market."

Sollio had taken ownership of the Comptoir coopératif's dairy, which distributed milk in Montreal. It continued operations for a few years, then sold the service to the Montreal Milk and Cream Cooperative in 1929. However, it retained control of its "management to protect the funds advanced to the new organization."



Sollio continued the SCA des fromagers' operations in the meat sector, which saw major growth between 1923 and 1930. With the help of propagandists and livestock industry specialists from the federal and provincial departments of agriculture, "the number of heads of livestock traded at the Pointe-Saint-Charles market by La Fédérée grew by 75%." The largest increase was in lamb. The cooperative was sensitive to the issue of livestock transportation, and in 1929, "a cooperative sales department was established in order to organize permanent shipping companies in local areas."

Beginning in 1927, the Princeville abattoir had to compete with a holding that resulted from the consolidation of four slaughterhouses under the name Canada Packers. In 1933, it was estimated that this company and Swift controlled over 85% of the Canadian market. A federal commission of inquiry would prove that collusion was present. The cooperative then formed a sales agency to "definitively establish the principle of sales according to the quality indicated by the cooperative."

Sollio carried out several initiatives in the poultry sector, including persuading Charlevoix turkey farmers to adopt grading. This move capitalized on a reputation that extended as far as the United States.

The cooperative's operations in the meat sector were described as follows: "It sells pork, veal and lamb slaughtered on farms to its outlets in Quebec and Montreal. In Princeville, the cooperative performs the slaughter itself; there, it also prepares certain delicatessen meat products: smoked ham and sausages. The abattoir supplies towns in the immediate vicinity (Victoriaville, Asbestos, Trois-Rivières) and the other outlets. Grocers and butchers are the primary customers of the meat department." Trucks, a new mode of transport at the time, were privileged. Beginning in 1929, the Princeville abattoir offered to collect animals directly from farmers, which was greatly appreciated.

Sollio had an urban sales department to market specialized products, which made an undeniable contribution to the development of Quebec's regions. The prevailing rule was to pay farmers an advance equal to 50% of the sale price. Regardless of the product or its origin, the cooperative sought to maximize profits for its members. Sollio sold the products of three associations that represented honey producers, maple syrup and sugar producers, and vegetable growers, respectively. From 1925, it also sold canned foods, tomatoes, corn, beans, Gruyère from La Malbaie, and eggs from Saint-Félix-de-Valois.

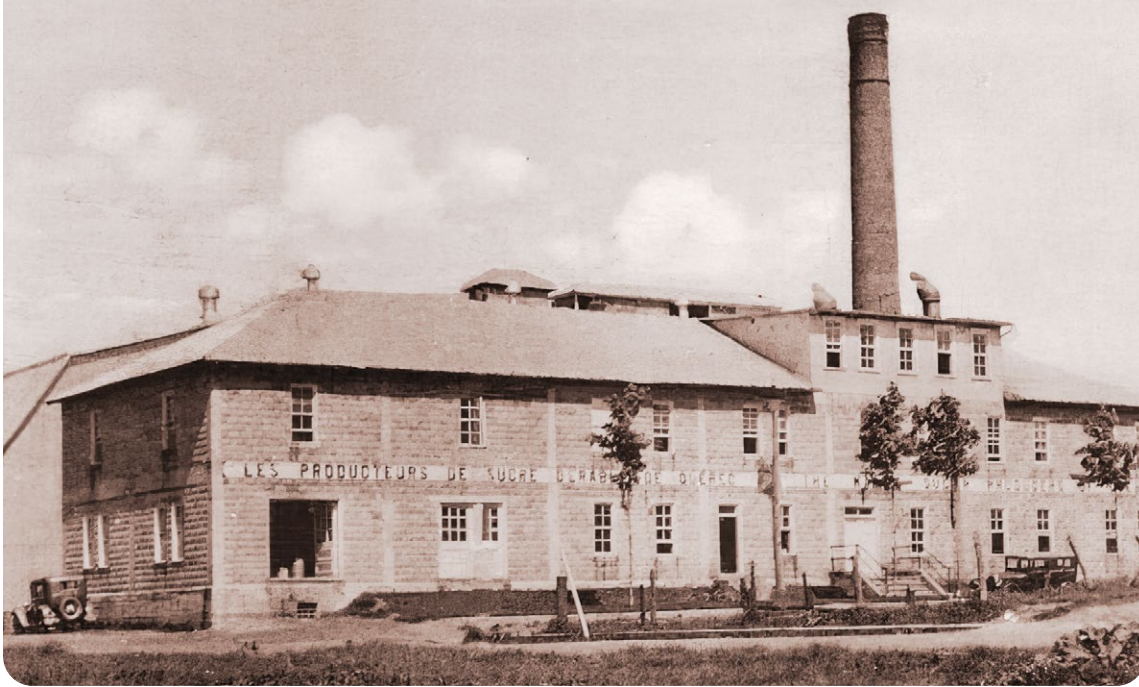


Milk distribution in Montreal.



LAITERIE  
COOPERATIVE FEDEREE  
Lait Pasteurise

Tel. Belair  
3302

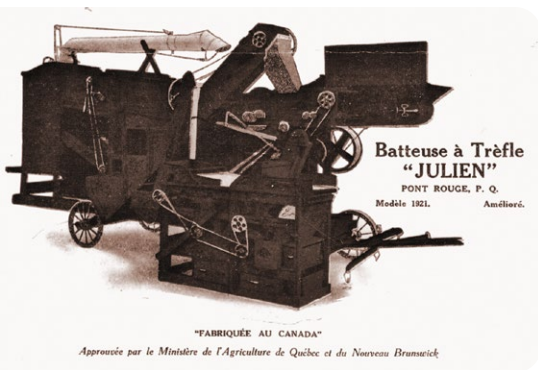


The maple sugar producers of Quebec, Plessisville, P. Q., Canada

## LA COOPÉRATIVE DES PRODUCTEURS DE SUCRE D'ÉRABLE DE QUÉBEC (1925)

Sollio acted as an incubator to encourage producers in the maple sector to adopt the cooperative model.

“In the early 1920s, Quebec’s maple industry was in disarray. Quebec producers were powerless against business interests that controlled the market and offered a meagre 4¢ to 5¢ per pound— ‘take it or leave it.’ To address the problem, Quebec’s Minister of Agriculture asked Cyrille Vaillancourt, head of the apiculture and maple syrup department, to find a solution. In collaboration with the Coopérative fédérée de Québec, the Coopérative was officially formed in 1924. 102 producers from Dorchester and Mégantic counties [associated] to form a united front against a buyers’ monopoly whose demands [threatened] market stability. Together, they put in place structures for collecting, storing, and marketing maple syrup. In [1932], a new product [was] developed at the Plessisville plant: maple butter, the only product of its kind that [was] certified pure.” In 2022, this cooperative, renamed Citadelle, was still in Plessisville. It sells honey and cranberries in addition to maple products. It also operates Délices Érable & Cie, a shop in Old Montreal.



The rural sales department was the key link in farmers' supply chains. At the time, each butter maker used different packaging, without concern for its quality. A higher-quality wooden butter box was developed, and it became the new standard. To support cheesemaking, the cooperative sold products such as parchment paper, cheesecloth, salt, and colouring.

Sollio continued selling the farm implements that had been available from the Comptoir coopératif de Montréal and expanded this line of business throughout Quebec. "The machines [were] shipped directly from the manufacturer, while spare parts [were] available through outlets or affiliated cooperatives."

### **ADVANCES IN AGRICULTURAL TECHNOLOGY (1923–1929)**

To meet demand from their members, agricultural cooperatives began distributing equipment. Plows, harrows and threshers manufactured in Quebec and the United States were sold to customers throughout the countryside. Mechanization quickly increased the productivity of farms. In 1911, for example, a scant 10,000 pounds of clover seed were produced in the province. Four years later, thanks to improved seeds and better cultivation techniques, the harvest surpassed 300,000 pounds. In 1924, the Coopérative fédérée de Québec stopped selling saddlery and signed a petroleum procurement contract with Sun Oil Company (later Sunoco). This development attests to how widespread tractor use had become in farming. In the countryside and in cities, the public was using horses less and driving vehicles more. In 1921, only 7% of farms owned an automobile. One decade later, 22% did.

Agronomists encouraged farmers to use inorganic fertilizers when necessary to improve crop yields. These products were sold by the Coopérative fédérée de Québec and other suppliers, and sales quickly shot up as farmers witnessed the results.



Warehouses in Le Havre where dairy products are classified by government inspectors to be shipped to different regions of the province.





## Branding

Determined to become known for the products it brought to market, including eggs, butter and honey, the organization invested in many promotional initiatives, including “samples exhibited in the halls of Parliament, the distribution of flyers to grocers, and demonstrations by experts at retailers.” Initiatives were also conducted in larger cities.



Goods being loaded at La Fédérée's Montreal location. Motor vehicles are beginning to compete with horses.



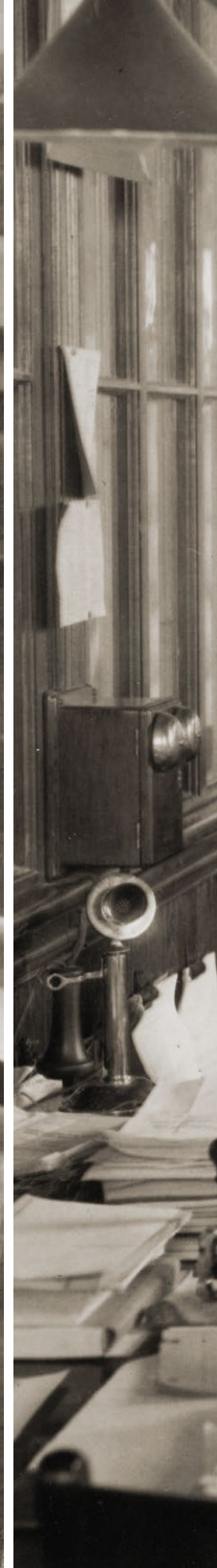
### **Relations with members**

From the beginning of its operations, Sollio had outlets in various locations throughout the province. In addition to the specialized facilities in Sainte-Rosalie and Princeville, outlets could also be found in the Eastern Townships, Beauce, and Saguenay–Lac-Saint-Jean. Sollio also sought to strengthen the bonds between members, establish new outlets, and create a propaganda department to take over the Department of Agriculture's efforts in this area. The organization was quickly faced with a major challenge: the managers of its main outlets acted like businesspeople rather than cooperators, which risked harming the cooperative.<sup>16</sup> This was the case at the Montreal headquarters.





DEFENSE  
DE  
FUMER





COOPERATIVE DES PRODUCTEURS DE QUEBEC

## FROM PROPAGANDISTS TO CONSULTANTS

With financial support from the Department of Agriculture, the propaganda department was established in the summer of 1923. It served as a management training ground and promoted cooperative and syndicate institutions as well as an educational program. Sollio wasted no time in utilizing the department's services.

The role of propagandists would vary over the years. Beginning in 1928, in the face of fiercer competition, the department's staff was assigned to commercial roles as a priority.

The cooperative ideal was kept alive through cinema and through agricultural publications such as *Le Bulletin de la ferme*. Seeking to take an active role in the development of local cooperatives, the department financed the production of a film on the cooperative's achievements. Entitled *Sur le chemin de la fortune*, it was screened at a Sollio assembly at the Quebec Auditorium in February 1927. The showing proved to be a major success.

In the late 1950s, as farming became more professional and institutions were established, the role of propagandists changed again. They officially became consultants to the management of cooperatives. From that point forward, they acted less as local promoters or popular educators and more as experts, thanks to their education in agronomy.

In 2022, with support from the Ministry of Agriculture, these consultants help spread the word about modern agricultural techniques and educate farmers on caring for land, livestock, and more. They are key players in implementing evidence-based agriculture that is responsive to the economics of the market. Thanks to these professionals, farmers can rely on an ecosystem of consultants with various specialities who ensure that their farms can be profitable.

# Le Journal d'Agriculture



Honoré J. B. Caron, ministre de l'Agriculture de la province de Québec, à qui la France vient de rendre trois ans de son collaboration fidèle, dans ce ministère, la carrière de ce grand politique agricole.

## Membership

To join the Central, a local cooperative had to agree to make all its purchases and sales through the organization.<sup>17</sup> In exchange, the cooperative received “special discounts and territorial control over neighbouring parishes.” In 1929, the organization had 45 member cooperatives. Many cooperatives joined in the Saguenay–Lac-Saint-Jean region, forming 25% of the total, whereas there were only two member cooperatives in the area spanning Lévis to Gaspé. Nevertheless, all of Québec’s regions were covered.

Though operations with member cooperatives only constituted 10% of Sollio’s business volume, the membership picture was positive in 1929. Sollio not only maintained its numbers but grew them. Unity was profitable. “With only one central, the economic power of farmers was bolstered, while the local structure that incorporated a small number of parishes promoted participation in the life of the association.”

## Governmental control

Minister Caron’s role in Sollio is indisputable, as is the influence he had over the organization. In 1927, as he prepared to leave the Department of Agriculture, he stated: “If later on, after I exit politics, one feels that I have accomplished any good in the interest of the farmers of this province, one must assign it in particular to the Cooperative, which I made my pet project throughout my administration.”<sup>18</sup> Minister Caron’s actions and vision were major factors in the modernization and progress of French-Canadian agriculture. However, he also sowed division. His 1929 departure and the beginnings of the economic crisis would signal a major shift.

# 3

## **SOLLIO AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION** (1930–1939)

The October 1929 Wall Street Crash led to consequences beyond the loss of share value, a multitude of company bankruptcies, and millions of workers losing their jobs. The stock market crash battered the entire global economy, and the agricultural sector was not spared. Farmers had to contend with a drop in prices. The federal government instituted a farm credit system in 1929 to help farmers expand their farms, encourage new ventures, and promote the mechanization of equipment.

### **ADVANCES IN AGRICULTURAL TECHNOLOGY (1930–1939)**

Before the Second World War, electrification was rare in rural Quebec. A scant 10% of farms had electricity, even though the demographic weight of rural areas was still significant. In fact, 40% of the population lived in the countryside at the time. At the end of the war, a public electrification policy was instituted to address the situation, which spurred the modernization of farms. New technology, including milk refrigeration systems, simply could not function without electricity. Over 50 electric cooperatives were established, and as a result, all of Quebec's farms had electricity by 1955.

## THE STATE OF AGRICULTURE IN 1930

Following the extreme turbulence of the Wall Street Crash in October 1929, Quebec's agricultural sector was significantly worse for wear.<sup>19</sup> Agricultural commodity prices plunged, farmers topped the list of bankruptcies, and in 1930, a Department of Agriculture report showed that Montreal imported a large quantity of eggs, cattle, horses, fruit and vegetables from outside Quebec.

Governments took action. Quebec announced that it would cover 1% of the 5% interest rate paid by farmers who had borrowed money under the terms of the *Canadian Farm Loan Act*. The federal government was asked to make changes to bankruptcy law, which was seen as detrimental to the agricultural class. Many farmers had taken on loans to modernize their farms in the boom times, and most did not have liquidity with which to pay their creditors. As a result, many declared bankruptcy, even though their balance sheets often showed that their assets exceeded their liabilities.

### Structural reform

Caron left the Department of Agriculture in 1929 and was replaced by Joseph-Léonide Perron. During his short time at the department, he would implement the "Perron program," a series of initiatives thought up by the department's agronomists. It aimed to make agriculture more dynamic and to change Sollio's legal framework so that it could become a "refreshed and remodeled" organization. "All aspects of the production and marketing of agricultural products [were] affected by this policy to industrialize agriculture through cooperatives." In Perron's view, the highest-priority issues in agriculture were "production and the organization of sales."

The first step was to divide Quebec's territory "based on cropping systems and accessible markets," resulting in a total of 23 districts. Sollio was a key player in the implementation of this reform. A special committee of the Provincial Agricultural Council was given the mandate of "analyzing the economic aspect of the cooperative organization."

While the committee did not mention it in its report, the modifications to the organization's incorporating act removed powers from the minister, including "the approval of the nomination and resignation of the executive council president, the monitoring of the organization's operations, and participation in management meetings." Proxy votes were also eliminated. The share price increased to \$25, and each association could purchase shares equal in value to 10% "of its paid-up common share capital." However, a sort of grandfather clause was included, retaining voting proportional to shares for "associations holding common shares acquired before 1930, as well as individuals," in accordance with 1922 provisions. The law confirmed Sollio's status as a federation of local cooperatives. Additionally, the rule determining dividends based on the volume of sales and purchases was relaxed: the obligation to amass a reserve fund was eliminated.

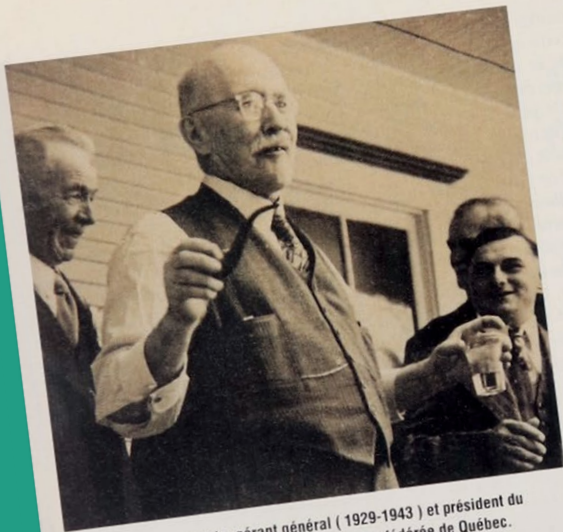


## JOSEPH-FÉLIX DESMARAIS

PRESIDENT AND GENERAL  
MANAGER OF SOLLIO  
FROM 1929 TO 1943

Joseph-Félix Desmarais (1877–1948) was a businessman and industrialist. After beginning his career in the insurance industry, Desmarais purchased a Spinelli pasta factory, which proved so successful that the business was acquired by Catelli. He was general manager there from 1911 to 1920. He was also involved on his farm, and in March 1948, became the first Francophone president of the Canadian Jersey Cattle Breeders Association. During his time at the head of Sollio, Desmarais played a key role in its reorganization and in the new cooperative legislation, making the Coopérative fédérée a major and progressive enterprise.





Joseph-Félix Desmarais, gérant général (1929-1943) et président du comité exécutif (1930-1943) de la Coopérative fédérée de Québec.

# Joseph-Félix Desmarais et la réforme agricole de 1930

Par Jacques Michel\*

Histoire

*«Il est une chose que je veux dire avec autant d'énergie que je suis capable. C'est que le progrès de la Fédérée, depuis 1929, est attribuable, dans une proportion énorme, à M. Desmarais.»*

Henri-C. Bois  
Conseil d'administration  
Coopérative fédérée de Québec  
22 juillet 1943

La Coopérative fédérée de Québec voit le jour en 1922. Elle est la résultante de la fusion de trois coopératives: la Coopérative centrale des agriculteurs de Québec (appelée avant 1920 la Coopérative des fromagers), le Comptoir coopératif de Montréal et la Coopérative des producteurs de semences de Québec située à Sainte-Rosalie. Au moment de la fusion, la Coopérative des fromagers, par son chiffre d'affaires, est de loin la plus importante des trois coopératives. Cette dernière était surtout orientée vers l'exportation des produits laitiers. L'Angleterre était alors un débouché très important pour le fromage canadien, notamment le cheddar.

Cependant, la fusion des trois coopératives ne s'est pas faite sans difficultés. Le projet de fusion était discuté depuis plusieurs années. Le Comptoir coopératif de Montréal s'était opposé jusqu'ici au projet. Profitant des difficultés financières du Comptoir coopératif, le ministre de l'Agriculture, J.-E. Caron, décide de provoquer la fusion.

À ses débuts, la Coopérative fédérée exerce une double fonction: premièrement, elle écoule les produits de la ferme des agriculteurs et, à partir de 1923, ceux des coopératives de pêche de la Gaspésie et, deuxièmement, elle approvisionne ses membres en biens d'utilité professionnelle. Il est à noter que jusqu'en 1930, l'écoulement du beurre et du fromage est la principale activité de la coopérative. La législation de 1922 créant la Coopérative fédérée de Québec prévoyait que les membres des trois coopératives devenaient ipso facto membres de la nouvelle coopérative. Ainsi, les

anciens membres gardaient leurs privilèges. Entre 1922 et 1930, le membership de la coopérative oscille à 8 000 membres, majoritairement composé d'individus. Les années 20 et la première moitié des années 30 seront des années très difficiles au niveau de l'économie internationale. L'Angleterre, première puissance mondiale et principal client de la Coopérative fédérée pour les produits laitiers, sort particulièrement brisée politiquement et économiquement de la Première guerre mondiale. Au niveau du commerce international, cette période est marquée par de grandes fluctuations économiques qui conduiront au krach boursier de 1929. L'agriculture n'est pas épargnée. Le revenu à la ferme des agriculteurs et les produits agricoles chutent dramatiquement. Ce n'est qu'à partir de 1936 que l'économie se redressera véritablement.

Cette période est également marquée par une lutte idéologique entre deux factions du monde agricole. Les deux principaux porte-étendard étaient Noé Ponton, directeur du Bulletin des agriculteurs et professeur à l'Institut agricole d'Okla, et le ministre de l'Agriculture, J.-E. Caron. De cette lutte émerge, en 1924, l'Union catholique des cultivateurs (l'U.C.C.). Par conséquent, en plus de la conjoncture économique très difficile, la coopérative doit faire face à un important conflit qui se reflète même à l'interne. Il faut absolument préciser que la législation de 1922 créant la Fédérée donnait un pouvoir d'ingérence au ministre.

Joseph-Félix Desmarais et J.-A. Pâquet ont, J.-F. Desmarais accusé d'avoir politisé la coopérative. Joseph-Félix Desmarais était partisan de l'indépendance politique acquise avec la réforme. J.-A. Pâquet démissionne de son

gestion de Joseph-Félix Desmarais nous constatons une progression d'adhésion de membres à la Fédérée. D'une fin des années 20, elles atteignent quatre cents au milieu des années 30. Cette progression se traduit par une stratégie de la Fédérée de rassembler des sommes d'argent pour améliorer les services économiques. Joseph-Félix Desmarais gère la dimension économique des services de L.-P. Bois, responsable de la Fédérée, qui devient ultérieurement directeur de la Fédérée, démontrant une attention accrue pour l'aspect associatif, autre

La Fédérée compte Joseph-Félix Desmarais remarquable. Il a permis de réaliser des millions \$ de surplus de produits agricoles et cela sans que cela ne soit une charge pour la Fédérée. Et cela sans que cela ne soit une charge pour la Fédérée.

J.-E. Bois au conseil d'administration de la Fédérée. Henri-C. Bois, directeur de la Fédérée.

Henri-C. Bois, directeur de la Fédérée.

## Administration

Sollio's personnel practically doubled from 1930 to 1938, from 116 to 217 employees. The workforce had dropped in 1933 due to the economic situation, but it rose again in 1934 with the opening of a warehouse in Pointe-Saint-Charles. The mill in "Saint-Henri"<sup>20</sup> [provided] work to over 40 people." Working conditions improved; office employees were entitled to two weeks' vacation; and the working week was modified to 52½ hours for warehouse employees, 43½ hours for male office staff, and "38 hours for women."

### UNION CATHOLIQUE DES CULTIVATEURS

Founded on October 2, 1924, the Union catholique des cultivateurs (UCC) came onto the scene in a postwar context of overproduction, falling prices, farmer debt, and migration to cities. With the electrification of the countryside, the introduction of provincial farm credit, and lobbying for laws governing agricultural practices and relations with the government, the UCC quickly became a major player representing and defending the rights and interests of Quebec farmers.

Today, this organization is known as the Union des producteurs agricoles (UPA). Its primary mission is to promote, defend and develop the professional, economic, social and moral interests of Quebec's farmers and forestry producers.



General Congress of the Union catholique des cultivateurs, 1945 (BAnQ, Montreal, 6, S7,SS1,P18894). From left to right: Samuel Audette, J. A. Manion and Albert Laframboise, Mr. Chalifour, Union chaplain, Paul Boucher, civil servant with the Ministry of Agriculture, Laurent Barré.



General Congress  
of the Union catholique  
des cultivateurs, 1945  
(BAnQ, Montreal,  
6, S7,SS1,P18894).



## Commercial operations

Faced with a troubling financial situation, Sollio President and General Manager Joseph-Félix Desmarais had to make sound decisions, such as closing the Princeville poultry facility. Nevertheless, he managed to rectify the situation in 1931. While agricultural commodities generated thin profits, “operating equipment [compensated] for this low profitability.”

The butter and cheese division, which had been Sollio’s driving force since its founding, suffered the consequences of business decisions in the 1930s. These decisions included the choice to stop selling products at auction and the end of Sollio’s contract with the firm Lovell & Christmas. The cooperative also sold its cheese directly on the English market. Producers in Lac-Saint-Jean and the Lower St. Lawrence were offered higher prices by merchants who bypassed Sollio.

The impact was significant. In 1931, cheese consignments at warehouses fell by 46%.<sup>21</sup> Sollio only handled “one quarter of provincial production” at the time. It would take an agreement with the UCC in 1938 to see significant improvement to the situation, that is, “a little over 45% of the production of cheese dairies and approximately 15% of that of butter makers.”

The organization was forced to support operators in dire financial straits. Sollio ensured the supply of milk powder for its feeds and made an additional volume of milk available to the Montreal cooperative. It also provided expertise in the field.

The idea of centralizing butter making facilities and cheese dairies grew in popularity in the 1930s. In 1933, the Quebec Dairy Industry Commission proposed “replacing small private operators, which harm the competitiveness of Quebec’s industry, with larger units managed according to the cooperative model.”<sup>22</sup> While a subsidy for the transport of milk was passed, the idea was less successful in more remote regions, “where milk sources [were] limited.” New cooperatives in central regions adopted this approach and attempted to diversify their business by making ice cream, condensed milk, powdered milk, and casein, for example.

In Granby, the meeting of a farmer and an agronomist in 1937 sparked the idea of forming a regional cooperative. The founding assembly of the Société coopérative agricole du canton de Granby took place on August 24, 1938. In 1979, this entity changed its name to Agropur, Coopérative agroalimentaire.

Other cooperatives of dairy farmers were formed simply to “take control of the sale of their products, thereby maximizing their profits.” In 1939, around 50 dairy farmers in Saint-Guillaume joined forces to “create a cooperative society named ‘La Société coopérative agricole de beurrerie de Saint-Guillaume.’” Led by Donat Côté, “these shareholders built a brand-new butter and cheese factory that began production in 1940.” Eventually, its name was changed to Agrilait.<sup>23</sup>

In January 1931, the first cooperative to make standardized feed was founded in Sainte-Rosalie. The warehouse there had been converted into a mill a short time before. The grain and feed sector posted strong growth (800% over ten years) thanks to the low price of feed. In addition to expanding the Sainte-Rosalie facilities, Sollio acquired a warehouse in Lévis in 1932 and another in Lennoxville in 1933. In 1934, a mill was built at the Port of Quebec, and another was rented next to the Lachine Canal in the Montreal neighbourhood of Saint-Henri. This location was a strategic one. Built to bypass the Lachine Rapids, the canal was at the heart of Canada’s Industrial Revolution. In the early 1930s, over 15,000 ships moved through the canal annually, and many businesses were found along its banks, supporting over 25,000 jobs.

In 1935, an agreement was also signed with a local merchant to cover the Trois-Rivières area. In addition, Sollio printed its feed formula on its feed sacks in order to “familiarize farmers with the principles of sound livestock nutrition,” making transparency a habit.



Competitors felt jostled by this new player. They complained to Minister of Agriculture Joseph-Adélarde Godbout, whose response illustrates his keen understanding of the organization's *raison d'être*: "[...] the agricultural class has been exploited in the past by certain merchants and [...] it was for this reason that this cooperative was founded."<sup>24</sup> However, he added for good measure that the cooperative "must not engage in unfair competition."

The seed and inorganic fertilizer division reaped the benefits of the growth in feed. Sollio opened an outlet in Pointe-Saint-Charles to "manage the sale of seeds produced by cooperatives (primarily oats, millet and red clover)." At the local level, enthusiasm showed no sign of waning. Between 1931 and 1935, 17 seed growers' cooperatives were formed. Sales jumped from \$200,000 to \$800,000 in just four years. The seed business extended to Northwestern Quebec as well: "La Fédérée outlets in La Sarre and Amos [were] also equipped to scalp millet and clover seeds in order to utilize surplus hay production from Abitibi."<sup>25</sup> Fertilizer sales saw highs and lows. However, they were up in 1939 and "[exceeded] 20,000 tonnes, which is equal to one third of the market."<sup>26</sup>

Sollio made a positive impact. It exerted downward pressure on fertilizer prices, so much so that the average price in Quebec dropped below that in Ontario. It also spurred changes to business practices. For example, it motivated Canada Packers, a powerful English Canadian competitor, to open a mixing plant in Montreal and offer its services in French.

In the meat sector, the Canadian Livestock Co-Operative ceased operations in 1932. The Canadian Livestock Cooperative of Quebec, a Sollio subsidiary, picked up where the organization left off. The new entity experienced significant growing pains. A "drop in sales [reached] close to a half million dollars in 1933."<sup>27</sup>

Clubs<sup>28</sup> of pig and lamb farmers sent their animals to Sollio. In 1939, the organization reached 153,000 heads traded "on the public market in Montreal in 1939."<sup>29</sup> Slaughtered animals can also be sent to the abattoir in Princeville. In addition, two private abattoirs were built in Quebec City. They were supplied in part by the Quebec City outlet "thanks to pigs consigned by cooperatives in the region."<sup>30</sup>

Through its outlets, Sollio received both living and slaughtered poultry, as well as eggs. In the early 1930s, cooperative hatcheries grew in number. Expansion throughout Quebec continued. In addition to the headquarters and the Quebec City and Princeville outlets, a new outlet was built in Rimouski in 1935. It was



“equipped with cold rooms to store foodstuffs destined for the local market and the rapidly expanding [market] in Côte-Nord.”<sup>31</sup> The La Sarre outlet in Abitibi, which also opened in 1935, served the same purpose.

The fruit and vegetable division successfully promoted blueberries from Lac-Saint-Jean and green peas from the Gaspé Peninsula in the American market.<sup>32</sup> In 1934, it experimented with freezing strawberries from Île d’Orléans. It also implemented a potato marketing plan, which utilized screening centres in the organization’s main outlets. Honey, fish, and maple products were also sold. However, Sollio would eventually exit these markets, leaving room for other specialized organizations, including the Coopérative des producteurs de sucre d’érable and Pêcheurs-Unis.

## **Relations with the Department of Agriculture**

The proximity between Sollio and the department, while less extreme than in its early days, benefitted the organization. From 1930 to 1933, to facilitate its development in a difficult financial context, the government paid a subsidy to Sollio that was equal to 1% of its revenue. In 1933, this support was proportional to sales of goods produced in Quebec. There was additional funding for propaganda through the reimbursement of the salaries of certain department heads. Sollio also received a \$750,000 government loan “at a very advantageous interest rate, for an indeterminate period.”

Coopérative de Québec  
Canada

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Coopérative Fédérée de Québec  
Montréal — 9 — Canada

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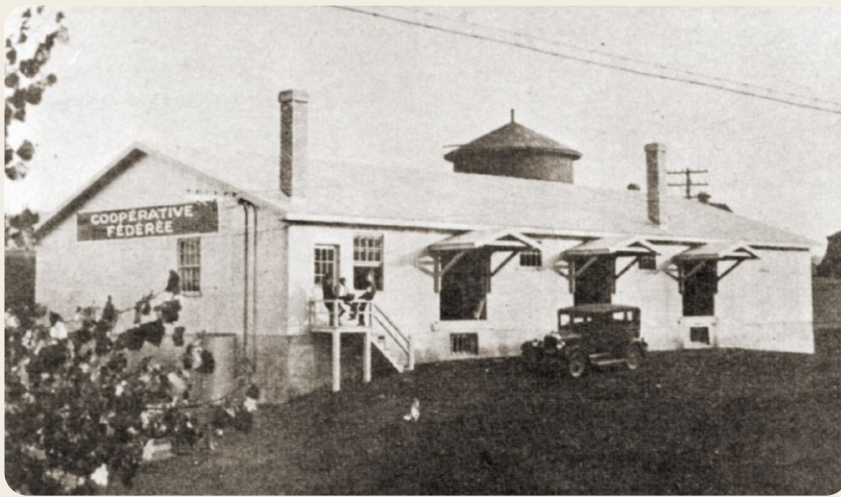
Miel du Canada

MANGEZ PLUS DE FROMAGE

UN LAISSE DE FROMAGE

La Société d'Industrie Laitière de la Province de Québec

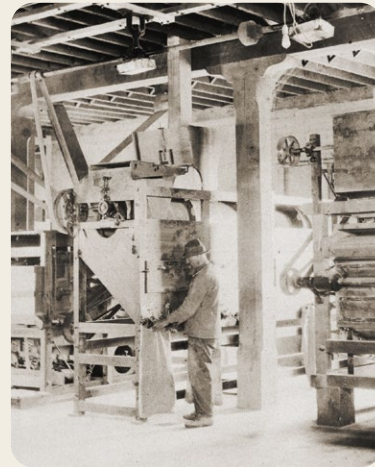
PRODUITS ALIMENTAIRES  
de la PROVINCE de QUÉBEC



Rimouski outlet.



Rue Saint-Pierre outlet.



Seed grains being cleaned  
in Sainte-Rosalie.

Strawberry wagons being  
loaded in Saint-Michel.



Lennoxville outlet.





The Department of Agriculture also took action at the local and regional levels. Cooperatives received a \$500,000 government credit to build warehouses, and new and existing cooperatives whose members entered into a trading agreement received a subsidy equal to 1.5% of their agricultural product sales.

### **Sollio undergoes expansion**

These measures stimulated the development of the cooperative movement in rural communities. This development took many forms: the amalgamation of multiple operators, the grouping of cooperative activities within parishes,<sup>33</sup> and the formation of new cooperatives, including cooperative hatcheries. The organization expanded its membership beyond the borders of Quebec by accepting “the affiliation request of two cooperatives in New Brunswick.”

Membership in Sollio provided access to a variety of sources of cooperative, technical and commercial information, including the monthly auditing of each cooperative’s books by Sollio’s accounting team. These audits were reviewed by the Department of Agriculture on an annual basis. Sollio could also award lines of credit to cooperatives, but it did so with great caution.

The 1930s saw “intense propaganda work,” which largely explains the increase in the number of agricultural cooperatives. In addition to Sollio’s 15 or so propagandists, who focused on supporting existing cooperatives, there were seven employees working in the Department of Agriculture’s cooperation section in 1937. These professionals focused on helping form new cooperatives and conveying cooperative principles. While individual membership was also possible, it was not the preferred option. Rather, individual farmers were encouraged to form parish associations.



ASSEMBLÉE GÉNÉRALE ANNUELLE DE LA COOPÉRATIVE FÉDÉRÉE DE QUÉBEC  
HÔTEL QUEENS - MONTREAL - 2 FEV 1939.



HIGHLIGHT  
PICTURES

## Relations with the UCC

Minister Perron's reforms to Sollio's incorporating act helped assuage the UCC's concerns regarding the organization's independence. However, it was not until 1938 that the two organizations took a significant step towards unity. Before that year, they were at odds over several issues, including the UCC's request that Sollio's propagandists also promote cooperative syndicates.

In 1936, however, the ground was more fertile, as there was a crossover between the leadership of the UCC and Sollio. On April 26, 1938, the Comptoir coopératif de l'UCC merged with the Central. The organization also inherited the newsletter *La Terre de chez nous*. Other tensions would arise between these key players in Quebec agriculture in the future. But for now, collaboration was on the agenda.

## Cooperatives

This period was an extremely fruitful one for the formation of new agricultural cooperatives. The 1930s expansion began with Minister Perron's reforms and was fuelled by the hard work of Sollio, the clergy, the Department of Agriculture, and the UCC.

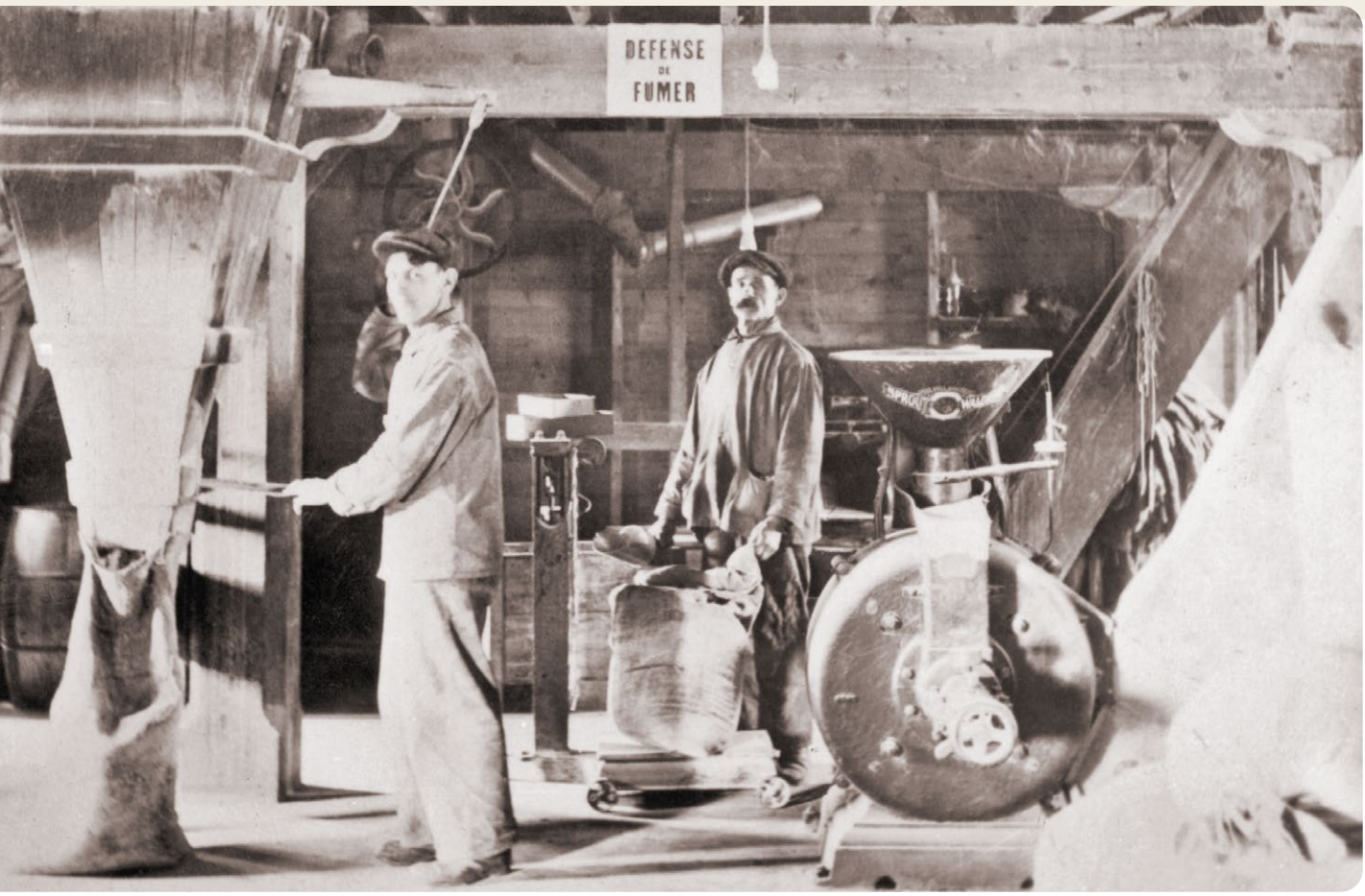
Until 1938, only cooperatives joined Sollio. Following the agreement with the UCC, however, cooperative syndicates also joined the Central. Mirroring the relationship between the farmer and his local cooperative, an affiliation contract governed the relationship between each cooperative and Sollio. "It [was] a formal agreement to procure supplies (organic and inorganic fertilizers, insecticides, fungicides, seeds) and to consign the dairy products and live animals sold by their members. The contract [was] for a minimum duration of three years." While this contract contained a penalty for non-adherence, tolerance was generally exercised.

At the time, increasing membership was also a focus: "The acquisition of a dairy operation by a cooperative is often accompanied by a recruitment campaign for new members, as took place in Yamachiche<sup>34</sup> or in Mont-Laurier<sup>35</sup> in 1936." The situation changed with the passage of an act in 1939 that created an annual fund of \$150,000, enabling "guarantees or advances to the cooperative agricultural

Henryville creamery.  
(JA, March 1936.)

Lévis outlet.





Feed-bagging operation, 1932.

associations”<sup>36</sup> and cooperative syndicates. The same year, the federal government established a new program to support the consolidation of small operations and, in time, “thereby improve the quality of the product.”<sup>37</sup> The program covered 50% of costs, and Sollio provided the remaining funds.

Attention was paid to bookkeeping, internal controls, and personnel management, which made a noticeable difference. From 1938, surpluses grew significantly. Credit unions were eager to lend to farmers so that they could purchase shares in their cooperatives.<sup>38</sup>

## THE PRIEST AND THE AGRONOMIST

Priests and agronomists are two key characters in the foundation of agricultural cooperatives. At the time, the church trained the next generation of farmers through the Jeunesse agricole catholique (JAC) movement, among other initiatives. Agronomists, on the other hand, focused on the day-to-day work of farm modernization. They also formed a professional order in 1937.

### Sollio's commitment to promoting the cooperative model

During a trip to Europe, Father Georges-Henri Lévesque was inspired by his observations of cooperative movements in Belgium and Lorraine, France. Upon returning to Quebec, he set to work, sharing his project with the leaders in various cooperative sectors and other organizations. At Laval University on "April 2, 1939, a meeting took place of the leaders of consumer and agricultural cooperatives, of credit unions; the provincial government and its cooperation department, Pêcheurs-Unis, the École des pêcheries de Sainte-Anne-de-la-Pocatière, the Institut agricole d'Oka, Rural Adult Education of McGill University, the Union catholique des cultivateurs and the Catholic unions."<sup>39</sup> The Conseil supérieur de la coopération du Québec was founded with the mission of promoting the cooperative business model. Throughout its history, Sollio and its representatives remained committed to this organization, taking its helm on many occasions. It would undergo two name changes: to Conseil de la coopération du Québec in 1951 and to Conseil québécois de la coopération et de la mutualité in 2006. As the cooperative model is in Sollio's DNA, the organization was naturally committed to promoting, exemplifying, and transmitting this model, even beyond its engagement in the Conseil.

# 4

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## THE LARGEST FRENCH-CANADIAN COMPANY (1940–1956)

The period from 1940 to 1956 was extremely fruitful for Sollio. In fact, *Le Devoir* journalist Gérard Fillion wrote in 1955 that Sollio was “the largest company owned by French Canadians.”<sup>40</sup> This recognition was the result of the giant steps taken by Sollio to become a leader in Quebec.

The number of agricultural cooperatives also reached a record high, and in the 1940s, Quebec posted the largest number of farms ever recorded. This period began with the Second World War, which proved fairly profitable for farmers, with high demand for agricultural products, especially milk, eggs, and bacon, on the English market. The era also saw a change in direction from the provincial government as the Liberal party and Premier Adélard Godbout took power. A trained agronomist, Godbout combined the roles of premier and Minister of Agriculture.



Inauguration of the first  
Coopérative d'électricité  
de Saint-Jean-Baptiste de  
Rouville line in 1945. (BAnQ,  
Montreal, E6, S7, P18590.)



### **ADVANCES IN AGRICULTURAL TECHNOLOGY (1940–1956)**

Rural electrification was facilitated by the formation of over 50 cooperatives. As a result, all farms were supplied with electrical energy by 1955.

The thirty years of growth and prosperity experienced across the Western world between 1945 and the early 1970s saw major improvements to the standard of living. Agricultural communities were no exception. Agricultural businesses continued to modernize, leading to significant financing needs as businesses adopted new technologies in great numbers. Led by President Joseph-Armand Pinsonneault and General Manager Henri-C. Bois, the Coopérative fédérée de Québec also sought to continue modernizing. It mechanized several of its facilities, including its mills and poultry slaughtering facilities. In 1950, it launched an agricultural machinery division with two pieces of equipment crucial to the farm of the future: the milking machine, which greatly facilitated the milking of cows, and the tractor.

In 1953, “six territory managers [were] hired to work on the organization of distribution on a regional basis.” Sales were conducted through local cooperatives, the most advanced of which were assigned a geographic sales area and could hire a salesman and a mechanic. In 1954, the legendary Oliver Super 55 tractor, which was suited to the size of Quebec farms, arrived on the market.<sup>41</sup> To educate its farmer members, the Central developed courses on “the technical characteristics and purchasing and operational costs of the machines.”<sup>42</sup> It also made sure that the company translated its technical documentation into French. However, Sollio and its affiliates had to maintain a large inventory and carry the financial burden of doing so, which was seen as a “necessary evil.”<sup>43</sup>



1. Saint-Ambroise creamery, owned by the Joliette SCA, 1934. (RMAPQ 1934-35.)
2. Potato warehouse in Saint-Éloi, Témiscouata County, 1930. (RMAPQ 1930-31.)
3. Manager Antoine Plamondon and graduate manufacturer Émile Pépin receiving milk canisters at the Saint-Raymond cooperative. (JA, June 1936.)
4. Lumber yard of the Victoriaville butter and cheese box plant, 1947. (BAnQ, Montreal, E6, S7, P43108.)
5. Establishment of the Société agricole de Berlcourt.
6. Gentilly flax mill, 1945. (BAnQ, Montreal, E6, S7, P27704.)







Gathering of farmers  
at Pierre Turgeon's farm  
in Saint-Anselme.  
(BAnQ, Quebec City,  
E6, S7, P12151.)

## JOSEPH-ARMAND PINSONNEAULT

(1892-1956)

After completing his studies at the University of Ottawa, Joseph-Armand Pinsonneault returned to Sherrington, Montérégie, to run his family farm. He sought to accelerate and modernize the development of the farm, which he grew from 110 to 440 arpents (37.4 to 149.6 hectares). He diversified production with potatoes, canning vegetables, sugar beets, and 800 apple trees.

Pinsonneault was highly involved in his community throughout his life, serving as mayor of his municipality for 14 years and as secretary for 24 years. He also chaired the local school board and the agricultural society. In addition, Pinsonneault served at the helm of the Association nationale des producteurs de betteraves à sucre. He was also president of his parish cooperative since its founding in 1936 and served on La Fédérée's management team from 1939 until his death in 1956.<sup>44</sup> It was during his term that the Coopérative fédérée made its most significant advances.<sup>45</sup>

# Un agriculteur à l'avant-garde de son temps

par Jacques Michel\*

«Bon père de famille, cultivateur à la page, citoyen exemplaire et coopérateur émérite, tel fut J.-A. Pinsonneault. Travailleur infatigable, d'une affabilité et d'une politesse exquise, il était un joueur honnête et avisé.»

Thomas E. Boivin, agronome,  
La Terre de chez nous,  
14 mars 1956



M. Pinsonneault apparaît au centre du groupe.

Ces propos de l'agronome Thomas E. Boivin nous font entrevoir les qualités exceptionnelles de celui qui fut président de la Coopérative fédérée pendant 17 années consécutives, Joseph-Armand Pinsonneault. Ce dernier et Henri-Charles Bois (voir le *Coopérateur agricole* de novembre-décembre 1993) ont été deux figures marquantes de la coopération agricole au Québec et ceci pendant un quart de siècle. Fait inusité, l'accession des deux hommes aux diverses responsabilités au sein de la Coopérative fédérée s'est faite presque en parfaite synchronie. Ainsi, Henri-Charles Bois entre à la Fédérée en 1938 tandis que Joseph-Armand Pinsonneault devient administrateur en 1939; Bois neault accède à la même année à la présidence; finalement, ce dernier décédera en 1956 après avoir été réélu pour un autre mandat, et Bois quittera la coopérative en 1957.

La croissance de la Coopérative fédérée de Québec n'aurait été possible évidemment sans la parfaite collaboration des deux hommes. Il va sans dire qu'on retrouvait chez les deux coopérateurs des qualités humaines similaires dont la principale était leur dévouement total pour le développement de l'agriculture canadienne-française

et de leur communauté en général. Dans cet article, nous allons tracer le profil d'un grand «leader coopératif», Joseph-Armand Pinsonneault.

## UN AGRICULTEUR D'AVANT-GARDE

Fils de Frédéric Pinsonneault et de Rose Délima Pary, Joseph-Armand naît en 1892 à Sherrington, comté de Napierville. Il fait ses études primaires à l'école du village et il les complète par un cours commercial à l'Université d'Ottawa. Il aurait aimé cependant poursuivre ses études plus loin. Joseph-Armand Pinsonneault avait une haute opinion de l'éducation qu'il essaiera de transmettre à ses trois enfants (Réal, Jacques et Bella).

Après ses études, le jeune Joseph-Armand prend les rênes de la ferme paternelle. Sous sa direction, la ferme Pinsonneault connaît une croissance appréciable pour l'époque. En 1956, date de son décès,

l'industrie laitière est la principale activité de la ferme. Le troupeau se compose d'environ 65 têtes de bétail Ayrshire pur sang. Toutes les vaches en production sont soumises au contrôle du Livre d'or et produisent entre 7 500 et 8 000 livres de lait annuellement. Le lait produit est vendu directement à l'état nature à Montréal. La ferme comprend deux silos derrière la grange-étable et de l'équipement moderne pour la traite, le refroidissement et la conservation du lait.

La ferme Pinsonneault élevait également des chevaux de race Percheron pur sang. A une époque, il y en a eu jusqu'à 17 sur la ferme. Toutefois, en 1956, on n'en compte plus que deux.

La ferme Pinsonneault compte 400 arpents de culture produisant du foin de légumineuses, des céréales, du maïs à ensilage, des grains de semence et occasionnellement, quand le marché le permet, des

Histoire

LEADERSHIP

de coopérateurs un d'animateurs. L'agro-





1. La Fédérée directors, 1944.  
(BAnQ, Montreal, E6, S7, P18330.)
2. Inauguration of the Saint-Jean-Port-Joli  
cooperative mill, 1950.  
(Private collection.)



## Administration

Sollio's ranks swelled once again, increasing fivefold between 1940 and the mid-1950s, when the organization exceeded 1,000 employees. The workforce had tripled as business volume surged during the Second World War, "despite the sale of outlets in the dairy sector." Against this backdrop, the outlets in Quebec City, Rimouski and La Sarre grew significantly.

With significant financial needs to finance its development, Sollio called on its member agricultural cooperatives for support. They agreed to loan Sollio a portion of their dividends in 1944. However, this funding does not appear to have been sufficient, as the organization was forced to turn to the bond market. "The Fédération des caisses populaires acquired an initial issue in 1945,<sup>46</sup> while the brokerage firm took care of subsequent [issues] (in 1947, 1948, 1950 and 1954)." At the end of the war, the modernization of Sollio's accounting system allowed the organization to "more rapidly [establish] the costs of the various operations of each outlet or department." The accounting department grew and, in 1948, had 134 people under its employ.

The founding assembly of the Saint-Casimir cooperative. In the front row is county agronomist Jean-Charles Magnan (holding a document). To his right is cooperative president Napoléon-Côme Tessier. In the same row are two other agronomists, Jean-Baptiste Cloutier and Abel Raymond.

Lionel Dion, Wotton SCA manager, and Hélène Gourdeau, secretary, preparing the remittance to cooperative members, 1948. (BAHQ, Montreal, E6, S7, P44700.)

► Cooperative gatherings.











## HENRI-C. BOIS

14 YEARS  
AS GENERAL MANAGER  
OF SOLLIO



Henri-C. Bois (1887–1962) performed a number of roles throughout his prolific career. After serving as an overseas lieutenant-colonel in the Canadian Army during the First World War, he received an extensive education in agronomy, studying in Quebec, the United States, and France. He then became a professor at the Institut d'agronomie d'Oka and later joined the Department of Agriculture. He was a founding member, and the first president, of the Corporation des agronomes de la province de Québec\*. Today, this professional order grants an award in Bois's name.<sup>47</sup>

During his time at Sollio, including 14 years in the position of general manager (the longest tenure of any general manager in Sollio's history), he helped establish the new Conseil supérieur de la coopération du Québec in 1939, taking over as president from its founding president in 1944. Two years later, he became the founding president of the Conseil canadien de la coopération.<sup>48</sup> He spared no effort in supporting cooperatives in other sectors, including student cooperatives—a novel phenomenon at the time—by sharing his financial expertise.<sup>49</sup> Bois was a highly involved in the rapprochement with the UCC in 1938, of which he served as vice president until 1948.

A farmer himself, Bois always maintained strong ties with the agricultural sector. "He [ran] a farm in Saint-Bruno, Chambly County, specializing in seed grain and slaughter animal production."<sup>50</sup> Bois was an active member of his community and was mayor of Saint-Bruno from 1954 to 1955. After his time at Sollio, he was appointed to the Senate in 1957 and served there until his death in 1962.<sup>51</sup>

\* Subsequently renamed the Ordre des agronomes du Québec.

# Une vie consacrée à bâtir la coopération



Henri-Charles Bois, secrétaire (1938-1943), gérant général et président du comité exécutif (1943-1957) de la Coopérative fédérée de Québec.

Par Jacques Michel\*

En parcourant l'histoire de l'agriculture et de la coopération au Québec, un nom revient régulièrement, Henri-Charles Bois. Le monde économique, politique et universitaire a reconnu à tour de rôle la contribution de ce pionnier au développement de la coopération agricole au Québec. Parmi les nombreux honneurs reçus lors de sa carrière, on peut citer la décoration de Commandeur de l'Ordre du Mérite agricole du Québec; l'octroi d'un doctorat honoris causa ès Sciences agrico-

les de l'Université de Montréal; la nomination au titre de Commandeur de l'Ordre du Mérite agricole du Québec.

En 1956, la revue Commerce l'a désigné comme «l'Homme du mois». En son hommage, le directeur de la revue, M. Jean-Paul Forest, dira: «Très dévoué aux intérêts des nôtres, mais pas fanatique pour un sou, dépourvu de tout préjugé, M. Bois a vu dans la formule coopérative la planche de salut de notre groupement ethnique. Il a été, et il est encore, l'un des plus ardents apôtres de l'application de cette formule dans le domaine agricole, qui s'y prête particulièrement bien. Il est certainement l'un des principaux responsables des

grands succès qu'on y a remportés et qui dépassent tout ce qu'on a pu voir ailleurs.»

## DES ORIGINES RURALES

Henri-Charles Bois naît le 9 février 1897. Son père, Napoléon, agriculteur et commerçant, dut abandonner sa terre pour pouvoir subvenir aux besoins de ses neuf enfants. La famille Bois s'établit donc à Saint-Joseph de Lévis. Cette épreuve restera gravée dans sa mémoire.

Après des études primaires au Collège de Lauzon, il poursuit des études classiques au Collège de Lévis. Alors qu'il achève son baccalauréat ès arts à l'Université Laval, son père décède accidentellement. Bien qu'il doive aider sa famille à subvenir à ses besoins, il réussit à terminer son baccalauréat avec grande distinction.

Survient alors la Première guerre mondiale; Henri-Charles et trois de ses frères s'enrôlent dans l'armée. En tant qu'officier (lieutenant), il fait son service outre-mer. Cette expérience lui donne une discipline qui lui servira sa vie entière. À son retour, il tente un court essai de colonisation en 1919-1920 en Saskatchewan. Il décide par la suite de poursuivre ses études.

Désavantagé financièrement, Henri-Charles Bois doit renoncer à des études en médecine. Ses origines rurales et son intérêt pour les sciences naturelles l'entraînent naturellement vers l'agronomie. Toujours avec succès, il obtient, en 1921, le titre de licencié en sciences agricoles de l'Institut agricole d'Oka.

C'est alors qu'il entreprend une carrière de professeur à l'Institut. Il y enseigne de 1922 à 1929. Durant cette période, grâce à une aide gouvernementale, il poursuit des stages de perfectionnement d'une année à l'Université de Cornell (Ithaca, état de New York) où il étudie l'économie appliquée à l'administration de la ferme et, plus tard, à l'Institut agronomique de Paris où il reprend totalement ses études agricoles en s'efforçant de choisir les matières qu'il ne croit pas posséder suffisamment.

À son retour de Paris, le professeur Bois s'intéresse particulièrement à la pro-

Portrait

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ce sa vie active, Henri-  
rjours été au service des  
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officiellement par la Cor-  
agronomes, représente bien  
ce dernier, la coopération  
privilegié de servir la commu-  
semblant tous les individus  
n avenir meilleur.

Charles Bois meurt en 1962  
s laissant dans le deuil sa fem-  
x fils, Pierre, médecin et Jean-  
naire. Au moment de son dé-  
naitait avec son fils Jean-Mari-  
Saint-Bruno de Chambly. □

Coopérative fédérée, l'auteur est étudiant à  
A.E.C. stagiaire au Centre de gestion des  
l'Université de Montréal.

## The propaganda department

The propaganda department was renamed the educational department. At its helm was Roméo Martin, a trained agronomist. He established a new mandate for his department, which aimed to confer full powers to cooperators, help them conduct necessary tasks for themselves, and teach them about the cooperative model.<sup>52</sup>

No longer receiving government subsidies, the propaganda department turned its attention towards affiliated cooperatives.<sup>53</sup> Leadership was passed to Léo Filion in 1949. Filion designed the Coop flag and founded a cooperative order of merit within the Conseil supérieur de la coopération du Québec. He also assigned propagandists to remote regions in order to improve Sollio's reach. Personnel in the Montreal and Quebec City offices of his department therefore devoted more time to visiting cooperatives.<sup>54</sup> The department changed its name again in the mid-1950s, becoming the external relations and publicity department.

A single brand, "Fédérée," was created for the organization's products. Sollio also stopped publishing the prices of products distributed by the Central and the prices paid to farmers for their goods, as the competition had been using this information to their advantage.

## A paternalistic approach to labour relations

As was common at the time, Sollio's leaders took a paternalistic approach towards their employees. However, the end of the Second World War signalled the emergence of a new dynamic in labour relations, which manifested in unionization attempts and collective bargaining. "Workers at the Saint-Henri mill and the Princeville and Quebec West abattoirs [were] among the first employees of the cooperative to unionize." Employees covered by collective agreements enjoyed reduced working hours, paid annual vacation, holidays, and higher wages. Beginning in June 1945, the workforce could take part in "a life insurance and hospitalization plan, to which La Fédérée [made] a one-third contribution."<sup>55</sup> A pension fund was studied in 1946 and created 11 years later. However, "in the meantime, many employees received severance when they left, in recognition of their service."<sup>56</sup>



Propagandists for La Fédérée.

# COMMENT ORGANISER UNE BASSE-COUR

Débuts en Avril  
Profits en Octobre

COUVOIR COOPÉRATIF  
BLANCHE COMMANT  
300 Poussins  
Pharmath  
de Paris

ACHAT  
DE 300  
POUSSINS D'UN  
JOUR, DE QUALITÉ  
CONTRÔLÉE.

CONSTRUCTION D'UNE COLONIE ÉLEVEUSE 10x12

LES COUVOIRS COOPÉRATIFS, SOUS LA SURVEILLANCE DU MINISTÈRE DE L'AGRICULTURE, PRODUISENT DES POUSSINS DE QUALITÉ CONTRÔLÉE.

INSTALLATION DE L'APPAREIL D'ÉLEVAGE ET RÉCEPTION DES POUSSINS.

SOINS ATTENTIFS ET CONSTANTS  
*(la basse-cour est confiée en particulier aux membres de la famille.)*

ÉTABLISSEMENTS DE PATURAGES VASTES ET POURVUS DE VERDURE SUCCULENTE  
*(luzerne, trèfle ou trèfle)*

CONSTRUCTION, A L'AUTOMNE, D'UN POULLAILLER DE 100 POULES. (Plan gratuit fourni par le Ministère.)

100 BONNES PONDEUSES SONT CHOISIES ET PLACÉES EN QUARTIERS D'HIVER. (Sept-Octobre)

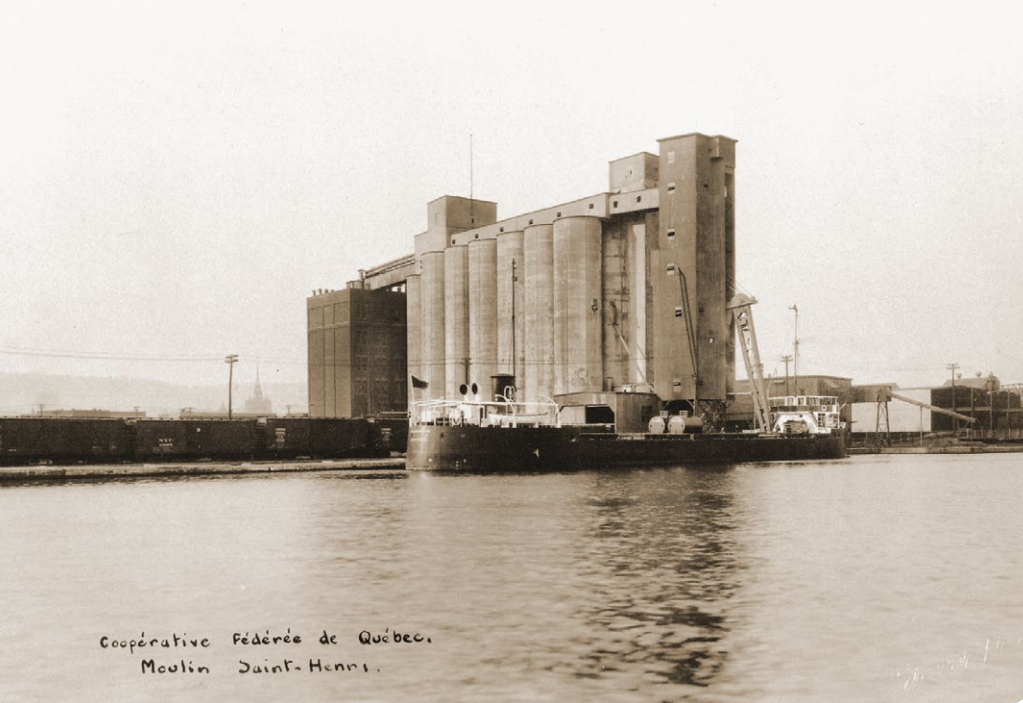
INSTRUCTEUR AVICOLE

ENGRAISSEMENT DES COCHETS ET MISE SUR LE MARCHÉ.

DES ŒURS EN ABONDANCE EN OCTOBRE NOVEMBRE, ET DURANT TOUT L'HIVER.

DE L'AIR PUR, DU SOLEIL ET, A L'AUTOMNE, UNE ALIMENTATION COMPLÈTE BIEN PROPORTIONNÉE FERONT PRODUIRE

Documentation  
Fournie par  
JOS. D. BARBEAU.



The Saint-Henri mill in the Port of Montreal.

► La Fédérée products on display at the first Salon de l'agriculture de Montréal (agricultural expo), 1953.

Agricultural machinery at the Trois-Rivières exhibition, 1955.

There was only one strike at the organization during this period, in 1947. It was a walkout across the entire Canadian meat packing industry with the aim of gaining better wages. Employees at the Quebec City and Montreal abattoirs showed solidarity with the movement and went on strike for a few weeks “without the strikers obtaining success.”<sup>57</sup> However, the biggest victims [were] farmers, who, for the duration of the conflict, [were] unable to send their livestock to the abattoirs.”<sup>58</sup> In a reflection of the importance of labour relations to its operations, Sollio hired a director of personnel.

## Commercial operations

After acquiring the movable and immovable assets of the Montreal Milk and Cream Cooperative in 1940, Sollio failed to see a role for itself as a milk distributor and sought to exit the business. It did so in 1944 by selling to Laiterie Notre-Dame Ltée.<sup>59</sup> It also sold its facilities in Dundee, Clarenceville, Saint-Sébastien and Henryville to Anglophone interests. These transactions generated slightly over \$150,000 for the organization. However, “the warehouses in Saint-Félicien, Lennoxville, Waterloo, Amos, and the land in Sainte-Rosalie, following the burning of the building in 1943, were transferred to local cooperatives at a very good price.”





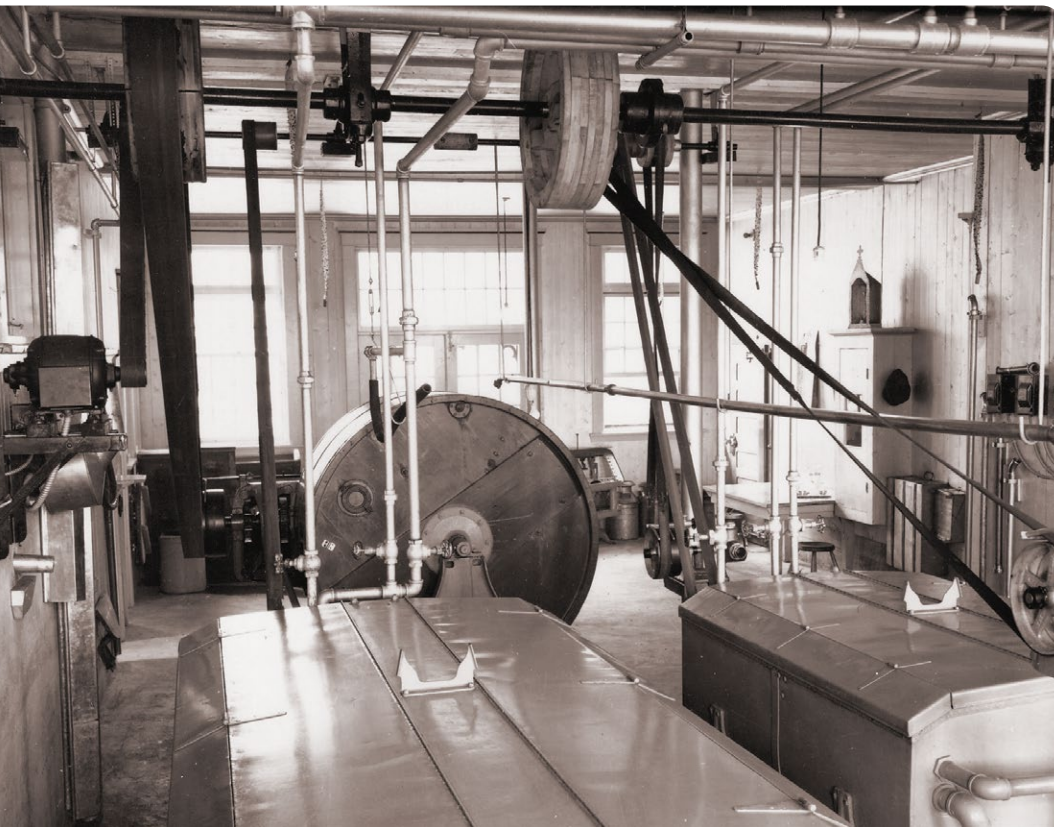


Legrade abattoir on D'Estimauville Street in Quebec City.

Wiltshire side being brined for the UK market at the Princeville abattoir. (BA, February 1945.)

Interior of the Montmagny cooperative syndicate butter factory, 1941. (BA<sub>NQ</sub>, Quebec City, E6, S7, P3509.)

Cheese factory under construction in Saint-Célestin de Nicolet c. 1945. (BA<sub>NQ</sub>, Montreal, E6, S7, P27690.)



The high demand for meat during the Second World War was an excellent opportunity for Sollio to focus on slaughtering to a greater degree. The organization improved its production capacity at Princeville and successively acquired two abattoirs in Quebec West. An amount of \$70,000 was invested in Princeville, including almost \$15,000 for wastewater treatment. The facility became subject to federal inspection from 1942 onwards. Two years later, it was considered “the most hygienically organized” facility in Canada.<sup>60</sup> The star product produced by the Princeville abattoir during the war years was Wiltshire side. This product, a half-carcass of salted fatty pork soaked in brine, was consumed by British soldiers.

When the war ended, Sollio focused on finished products “such as bacon, ham, sausages, bologna, blood pudding, jellied veal, etc.”<sup>61</sup> Sales were distributed amongst the regional market (36%), the Montreal market (25%), through cooperatives (9%), and elsewhere in the province (8%). A further 10% went to Ontario, and a final 10% was exported to the United States and elsewhere in the Americas.<sup>62</sup>

Located at the meeting point of several railroad lines, the abattoir in Quebec West posted rapid growth. Upon the acquisition of this abattoir, Sollio integrated poultry slaughtering into its operations. More and more animals, including animals on consignment from Eastern Quebec, were passing through the facility, requiring employees to work overtime. Sollio was cognizant that the abattoir could no longer meet demand. In 1954, it acquired another abattoir in Quebec City by purchasing shares from Legrade Inc.

While the organization was dominant in the meat market in Eastern Quebec, competition made the situation different in Montreal, due to the sole presence of the Canadian Livestock Cooperative. This cooperative “[managed] sales at the Pointe-Saint-Charles public market of animals consigned by cooperatives.” In 1955, an agreement with Maurice Lemelin enabled Sollio to use the slaughtering facilities of Eastern Abattoirs and construct a “building for the processing of meat.”<sup>63</sup>

Sollio made additional investments during this period. It expanded its headquarters at 130 Saint-Paul Street in Montreal and acquired other buildings on the same street. In 1953, a refrigerated warehouse was built behind the headquarters with “12 cold storage rooms over four floors.”<sup>64</sup> To help supply butter and cheese boxes to cooperatives, Sollio acquired a facility in Victoriaville in 1942, which used wood from the region. However, in 1953, as dairy exports slowed, this factory shifted to plywood manufacturing.<sup>65</sup>



The back of La Fédérée's headquarters, where farmers' products are received.

Sollio saw strong growth in the grain and feed sector, which was an engine for its development: “In 1947, the Saint-Henri mill alone contributed nearly 40% of its sales.”<sup>66</sup>

### **Sollio’s relations with governments**

From its founding until 1940, Sollio benefitted from a large amount of attention from the Department of Agriculture of Quebec. This relationship transformed in the 1940s. While the department remained favourable to Sollio due to its status as a collective enterprise owned by farmers, the wind had changed. As a result, “it received the same treatment as other businesses.” The provincial government stopped subsidizing propaganda activities and refused to sell the Saint-Henri mill. The federal government too was indifferent to Sollio’s cooperative status and submitted it to taxation.

The Department of Agriculture formed a team of 16 inspectors whose mission was to “monitor and audit local cooperatives. It also managed the education of members and officers and the study of production problems.”<sup>67</sup>

### **Dialogue between cooperatives**

While an association to unite and defend cooperatives had existed since 1909 in English Canada (the Co-operative Union of Canada), there was no such structure for Francophone cooperatives.<sup>68</sup> In 1946, Sollio General Manager Henri-C. Bois joined forces with other leaders in the cooperative movement to found the Conseil canadien de la coopération (CCC). This organization facilitated the emergence of other Francophone provincial councils, including the Union coopérative acadienne in 1955 and the Cooperative Council of Ontario in 1964.

## COMITÉ D'ENQUÊTE POUR LA PROTECTION DES AGRICULTEURS ET DES CONSOMMATEURS (HÉON COMMISSION, 1956)

According to the “Bilan du siècle” website of the Université de Sherbrooke,<sup>69</sup> the purpose of this commission was to study “problems related to the production, sale, and distribution of agricultural products and the protection of the respective legitimate interests of farmers and consumers.” In the report, the commissioners came to the conclusion that “The provincial [government] cannot become a trader of agricultural products and compete with legal and permitted initiatives. The provincial [government] must not take it upon itself to set the prices of agricultural products, except perhaps when the common good requires it absolutely: such as drinking milk. The provincial [government] is not the arbiter of disputes that may arise between various sectors with interests in selling agricultural products. It may, upon the request of interested parties, assist in the peaceful resolution of such disputes.” The state’s paramount role was to “support, intensify agricultural education, research, popularization, technical or specialized production services and marketing; conduct the mandatory inspection and grading of products in the best interests of producers and consumers, etc.”

In addition,<sup>70</sup> the report recommended a drastic reduction in the number of businesses, from 140,000 farms to 44,000 more specialized and productive farms. This number was deemed adequate for food self-sufficiency.

### Agricultural cooperatives from 1940 to 1950

Following a period of sustained expansion, the number of agricultural cooperatives levelled and eventually declined due to amalgamation and liquidation processes. It was also a period of regionalization.

#### GROWTH OF AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVES, 1938–1950

	1938	1950	%
Number of local cooperatives	215	609	183
Number of members	17,245	69,332	301
Sales (in M of dollars)	8.5	111.9	1,216
Net revenue of farmers (in M of dollars)	66.2	235.6	255

The dairy sector saw very strong growth until the late 1940s. The number of cooperatives in the sector increased from 57 in 1935 to over 337 in 1950. During the Second World War, these cooperatives made up almost 60% of all agricultural cooperatives. As a result, dairy products made up 5% of farm products brought to market by local and regional cooperatives, according to data from 1950.<sup>71</sup>

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### DAIRY OPERATIONS IN 1948

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<b>Total number</b>	1,007
<b>Cooperatives</b>	412
<b>Individuals (syndicates)</b>	488
<b>Companies</b>	109

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Salon national de l'agriculture, 1953.



BANQUE CANADIENNE NATIONALE RESTAURANT ASSURANCE

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NATIONAL CANADIAN BANK





ES U.C.C.



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# 5

## SOLLIO AND CHANGES TO RURAL LIFE (1957–1975)

Changes that were already underway in rural areas picked up pace during this period. The number of farms decreased significantly, while the size of farms grew. This led to a major increase in the average capitalization of farms, which ballooned from \$16,965 to \$196,665. The transition was accompanied by increased governmental support as a way to cushion the impact of the changes. In its first budget in 1960, the Liberal government of Jean Lesage doubled the funds available for loans granted under the *Farm Credit Act*. It also supported the dairy sector, which accounted for almost half of agricultural revenue, to maintain the incomes of impacted farmers.<sup>72</sup> When the Union Nationale returned to power a few years later, it adopted the 1967 *Crop Insurance Act*, which enabled the implementation of crop insurance programs for a growing number of crops.

The rural population, which had already decreased by 5 percent between 1941 and 1951, dropped another 24%.<sup>73</sup> In 1961, rural dwellers made up only 11% of the population. Far from slowing, this trend only accelerated in subsequent years, and was accompanied by a marked decrease in unpaid labour. Young people, including many women, were leaving rural communities to seek job opportunities in urban centres. This movement can be qualified as a true rural exodus.



The Plessisville dairy plant.

J.-Arthur Courteau, La Fédérée  
director from 1962 to 1965.

The modernization process, “in which agriculture [was] integrated into the capitalist economy,”<sup>74</sup> was accompanied by greater specialization by farmers. Diversity, on-farm consumption, and other secondary activities were abandoned as farmers focused on a single product, as highlighted by Saint-Pierre.<sup>75</sup> Reflecting these changes and the growth of other economic sectors, including services, agriculture now accounted for less than 2% of Quebec’s gross domestic product. At the same time, agricultural techniques were improving.



## New arrivals

After a long period of stability at Sollio, the organization experienced a turbulent changing of the guard, particularly with regard to its general management. At the time, Sollio was in the red, with a loss of slightly over \$1.7 million in 1962. Between 1962 and 1965, Managing Director J.-Arthur Courteau sought to address the situation with a rationalization scheme that included eliminating positions and relinquishing space. Courteau replaced former Department of Agriculture civil servants with talent from the private sector, some of whom were recruited from the competition. This decision was a breath of fresh air for the organization. Results were quick to materialize. The situation eventually stabilized, which enabled Sollio to even “improve the performance of the company in relation to the competition.”



## ROLAND PIGEON

PRESIDENT OF SOLLIO  
FROM 1969 TO 1980

After graduating from the Institut agricole d’Oka, Roland Pigeon (1911–1982) returned to his family farm in Verchères. He specialized in raising purebred Ayrshire cattle. Pigeon took great care in his operation, winning first prizes in his category at several exhibitions. *Le Bulletin des agriculteurs*<sup>76</sup> even referred to him as the “terror of exhibitors” in a dedicated article. Pigeon sat on the board of directors of the Coopérative agricole de Verchères from 1944 to 1964 and served for seven years as its president. He became a director at Sollio in 1960 and remained in that position until his retirement in 1980.

During his career, Pigeon was very active in the farming community, presiding over the Ayrshire Breeders’ Association of Canada and the Canadian Dairy Farmers’ Federation. Like other leaders of Sollio, he was awarded the Ordre du mérite coopératif du Québec, fourth degree, for his involvement in the cooperative movement. He also received an order of merit at the Canadian Co-Operative Congress in 1982.

### Fragile finances

“From 1949 to 1953, [Sollio] spent one million dollars on capital expenditures, much of which [was spent] at headquarters, and one and a half million the following year to purchase shares from Legrade.”<sup>77</sup> Far from slowing, this spending continued, “especially through the purchase of Eastern Abattoirs and the building of the new headquarters at the Central Metropolitan Market.” In 1959, these expenses reached \$4 million. Capital and surpluses did not follow suit, resulting in “a deterioration of the relationship between net equity and assets.”<sup>78</sup> The financial situation degenerated in 1962. The Canadian National Bank ordered the organization to adhere to two conditions: transfer the powers of management to the executive and replace the general manager with the treasurer, Henri Beauregard.

The Saint-Bruno slaughterhouse was built with an investment from the region, supplemented by grants from the provincial and federal governments.

Livestock loading ramp in Messine, Abitibi. (BAnQ, Montreal, E6, S7, P18522.)

La Fédérée directors, 1962.





◀  
L'Assomption SCA mill  
and garage, mid-1960s.  
(Private collection.)

Blessing of the Metropolitan  
Central Market premises by  
Monsignor Paul-Émile Léger,  
1960.

In addition to supplying  
cooperatives in bulk,  
La Fédérée serves a number  
of local areas directly.





Inauguration of the new location of La Fédérée's Rimouski outlet, 1955.

▶ Meeting of the advisory committee of managers, 1977.

## Changing course

Taking the helm of Sollio in 1965, Georges-Étienne Turcotte, who had managed a tobacco cooperative in Joliette, felt that the role of directors was not to manage the organization "but rather to ensure the continuation of the spirit of cooperation."<sup>79</sup> "For the first time in its history, the Central [was] led by the manager of one of its affiliates." After 1970, another transformation took place, and directors abandoned their involvement in local and regional matters in favour of "matters of general interest."<sup>80</sup> The departure of approximately 100 employees freed up space at headquarters, a part of which was then sublet. Sollio was eager to increase revenue rather than simply controlling and restricting costs. It formed an advisory committee of managers to strengthen relations with cooperatives, an important link in the Central's chain of operations. Georges-Étienne Turcotte greatly improved Sollio's management methods with regard to both accounting and human resources.





After a drop in the workforce during the tensions of 1962, the number of employees began to grow. In 1969, “the Central [had] 548 non-unionized employees: 286 office employees, 244 foremen, representatives, specialists and middle managers, as well as 18 senior executives.”<sup>81</sup>

The situation was different for personnel in plants, as technological changes and mechanization led to layoffs. “The automation of certain operations at the Saint-Henri mill, the new Saint-Romuald mill, and the La Fédérée abattoirs [led] to the elimination of several positions.” Sollio took the same approach as other actors in the industry by paying severance to employees who were laid off due to “technological changes.”<sup>82</sup>

Certain employees were also affected by plant closures. “Approximately 250 employees [were] affected by the production shutdowns at the two plants in Quebec City (1968–1969) and Victoriaville (1973).” These closures were explained “by a need to consolidate production in more modern facilities.”

Labour relations were rocky at this time. In an inflationary environment, adjusting compensation to the cost of living was the key issue. In 1974, “the CSN attempted in vain to form a common front against La Fédérée and two other agricultural cooperatives.”<sup>83</sup> Québec Poultry, Sollio’s main competitor, experienced losses during the same year, as well as “a third labour conflict in one year.”<sup>84</sup> In surrender, the owner sold his shares to Sollio, which closed two of the five plants and successfully negotiated a new agreement with the Centrale des syndicats nationaux. In these negotiations, Sollio “therefore [adopted] a new, prudent attitude that [sought] to reconcile its obligations towards its owner-users with a concern for employee equity, for both unionized employees and others.”

## Commercial operations

In the 1950s, Sollio hoped to make inroads in the meat sector. However, factors such as decreased sales, increased operating costs, and the need to modernize equipment slowed the process. Sollio had to adjust and make decisions based on its reading of the direction of the industry. The Quebec City abattoir was closed; Eastern Abattoirs was sold, and investments were focused on the Princeville abattoir, the capacity of which grew to “250,000 heads, of which 80% were pigs.” Sollio made two acquisitions: “the Edmond Sylvain Ltée company in Quebec City, which [operated] in red meat distribution, chicken slaughtering and processing, meat packing, and delicatessen meat. [It also] purchased of Québec Poultry, which [included] the Turcotte & Turmel abattoir in Vallée-Jonction, and which at the time [held] 15% of the pork market.” This was a major coup for Sollio, whose market share was now “50% of the Quebec market for chicken and turkey.” The company exported to American markets and explored the Asian market. Under the Legrade brand, with strong urbanization under way in Quebec, the expansion of supermarkets offered a good opportunity in the domestic market “for packaged meat products.” In this new market, “La Fédérée obtained a major contract from the Steinberg chain of supermarkets to make bacon [for its] private label.”

In the mid-1950s, Sollio felt that it could not meet demand in the poultry sector. The organization made extensive efforts to gain market share. An initial acquisition of an abattoir in Victoriaville in 1956, and an investment of \$300,000 two years later to increase its production capacity, were followed by the purchase of two other abattoirs, in Mariville and Saint-Félix-de-Valois, in the early 1960s. Sollio’s

Livestock being unloaded  
at the Princeville abattoir.

Eggs being received at the  
Quebec City outlet, late 1950s.





dynamic endeavours in this sector was in response to the strong growth in demand since the end of the war. The 1950s saw barbecue chicken rise in popularity. The development of barbecue restaurants stimulated consumer sales. These restaurants included the Saint-Hubert rotisseries, the first of which opened in 1951 on the Montreal street of the same name.

Sales also shot up thanks to supermarkets, and the trend only accelerated: “In 1957, the Steinberg grocery chain alone sold 100,000 per week.<sup>85</sup> In 1975, Quebec poultry farmers fed nearly 75 million broiler chickens (versus 6.5 million in 1955)—all primarily destined for the domestic market.<sup>86</sup>

The Victoriaville slaughterhouse in 1947. (ANQ, Montreal, P43109).



The results were quite different for egg production, which saw modest growth. The managers of cooperatives “[showed] less interest in this production than in the past. This [was] due to multiple factors, but they certainly feared losses related to the increase in the size of facilities.”<sup>87</sup> Production was limited in 1966 with the implementation of a joint plan.

The situation led many cooperatives to leave the egg business in 1975. Given the transformations in this sector, and always concerned with strengthening its ties to members, Sollio modified its charter to enable the establishment of an arm of egg producers from the three regions where the organization had abattoirs. As such, “members [were] entitled to year-end dividends and had a say on everything regarding the major orientations and activities of poultry abattoirs.”<sup>88</sup>



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CO. LTD.  
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WVILLE)  
& 1417



Employees packing carrots at the Sherrington cooperative.

Supermarkets, new players in the domestic consumption market, were gaining momentum in the 1950s. Their growth also influenced the fruit and vegetable sector. The Steinberg and Dominion chains wanted quality, standardized products supplied on a regular basis. They set the rules of the market, and Sollio made sure to meet their requirements. Meanwhile, the sale of fruits and vegetables collected by local cooperatives was facilitated by the move to the Metropolitan Central Market. The fruit and vegetable trade was no goldmine, however. In 1971, sales reached \$6.5 million, but dropped to under \$3 million in 1975 after Sollio withdrew from the canning sector.

The feed and fertilizer sector saw massive investments in the 1960s, both in facilities and in integrated farm programs. Thanks to adequate technical service, “La Fédérée [regained] the sales volume that it had lost to the competition.” In the grain and feed business, Sollio had to rectify the situation created by a drop in



consumption. It finally purchased the Saint-Henri mill, which it had wanted to acquire for decades, and upgraded it. In 1967, Sollio built an ultra-modern mill in Saint-Romuald, replacing a facility at the end of its lifespan. Improvements were also made to the La Sarre mill. Unfortunately, this mill burned down the following year, and Sollio chose not to rebuild.

“Many of the mills in the cooperative network were upgraded in the 1960s [and] equipped to offer new services such as bulk feed and feed cubes. This also [contributed] significantly to growing sales. Sollio only [made] some of the feed, but took charge of various services to cooperatives, such as developing feeding programs, promoting Coop products, selling supplements, providing technical services.”

### **COOPERATIVE RESEARCH FARMS (1954 TO TODAY) <sup>89</sup>**

Sollio first partnered with this highly unique initiative in 1966. Founded in 1954, Cooperative Research Farms (CRF) boasts members in Canada, the United States, and France in 2022. Its cooperative members are Sollio, Federated Co-ops and Tennessee Farmers Cooperative. The organization takes a participative approach to conducting research projects in order to be at the forefront of animal nutrition. It systematically carries out these projects in cooperation with its members. Research topics are determined cooperatively, and the research itself is co-produced. The joint effort of CRF’s research team and its members’ animal nutrition specialists aims to improve the efficiency of meat, milk and egg production.

Over 67 years, its members have dedicated human and financial resources to conduct in excess of 3,250 research projects. They have also helped design and carry out research projects. CRF has 93 employees across its research and development and technical support teams. Its members are active in a total of 48 countries.

## Integration

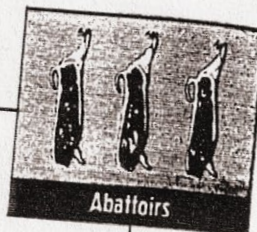
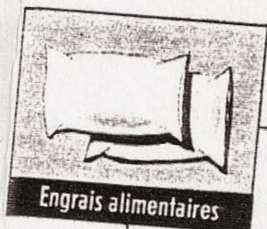
In the 1960s, the capitalist competition adopted a strategy of vertical integration, which aimed to enhance coordination between farmers and the cooperatives that brought their products to market. In the pork sector, Sollio became a promoter of high-quality pork by investing in genetic crossbreeding. After experimenting with a sow rental program that did not prove profitable, Sollio launched a forward sale program for sows in 1964. This program had a positive effect on the operations of cooperatives. “Over the years, a network of Coop farrowing houses developed. In 1976, this network [had] 18,000 sows across 26 cooperatives. With regard to finishing, Sollio [saw] great success with a piglet and feed financing policy.” This initiative, called Cobec, was a joint venture with other cooperatives. From 1964, Sollio “granted an advance for the purchase of piglets and feed and recovered it when it came time to pay the remittance on pigs delivered to its abattoirs.”<sup>90</sup> As such, “the limit of 10,000 pigs gradually increased to 50,000 in 1967.”<sup>91</sup>

In the poultry sector, competition spurred greater integration of farmers. Specialized farmers were targeted by companies that, due to their business volume, could offer technicians, provide special feed and make improvements to their feed. These farmers therefore tended to abandon the cooperative model. In response, Sollio chose the path of production contracts. This was not a spontaneous process, however, as “it [took] significant education to train specialized farmers.” For this purpose, the poultry division innovated by hiring “the first veterinarian to be employed full time by a Quebec company.”<sup>92</sup> His name was Louis Layahe. After operating three hatcheries in the 1960s, Sollio focused on the Arthabaska and Saint-Félix-de-Valois hatcheries.

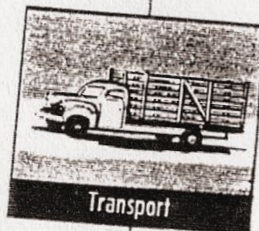


Louis Layahe, the first veterinarian to work full time for a Quebec company.

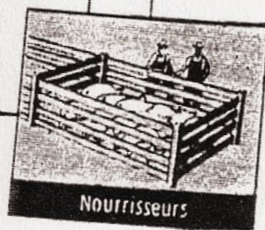
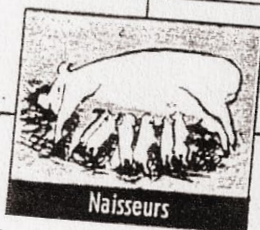
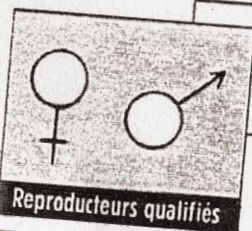
# CENTRALE



# LOCALES



# PRODUCTEURS



## The introduction of pesticides

In 1966, Sollio acquired a scalping business and seed vendor in Saint-Philippe-de-Laprairie under the Coop brand and sold new seed mixtures. Plant protection was also an emerging line of business. Classes were offered to teach managers how to use chemical products, which had in fact been employed since the end of the Second World War. Gradually, farmers adopted these new tools. “After organic and inorganic fertilizers, pesticides [were] now among the common tools of farmers.” Sollio’s many initiatives in the feed sector had finally paid off. Its market share grew from 30% in the 1950s to 35% in 1975. “With regard to inorganic fertilizers and crop protection products, its position [remained] largely the same, at around 30% of the market,” however.



## ADVANCES IN AGRICULTURAL TECHNOLOGY (1957–1975)

In the 1950s, the tractor had not yet fully supplanted horses on farms. Some farmers stayed loyal to these animals and the horsepower they provided. They were skeptical of the added value that a tractor could provide. While the tractor would eventually win the day, the Coopérative fédérée held only 10% of market share in the mid-1960s. The cooperative distributed Renault tractors from France in addition to the Oliver brand, and market share grew to over 25%. Sollio also sold concrete silos, which sprang up all around the countryside. Hesston hay equipment was integrated into its range of products beginning in 1971. The next year, Sollio became the exclusive seller of silage equipment from Dion, a Quebec brand. Many other products were added to the range, bringing success to farmers and making the agricultural machinery division more profitable. Sollio’s market share in tractors grew to 25%. Results were even better “for mower conditioners, of which it obtained 40% of sales in 1975.”



## The founding of Sonic

Sollio sought to be active in the petroleum sector: “the petroleum trade [proved] very profitable for the cooperative.” Above all, it wished to respond to the needs of its cooperator members, who were often targeted by sellers seeking short-term profits.

Sollio entered the sector in 1958. It “[acquired] a company in bankruptcy, Piette & Frères of Joliette, which specialized in the distribution of fuel oil to institutions and dairies.<sup>93</sup> As a result, the cooperative now [owned] a reserve station and a few trucks. It also [reached] an agreement with the UPA and its federations so that they would encourage their members to purchase [Sollio] petroleum.”<sup>94</sup>

Sollio also purchased former petroleum distributors STRATO. After 1965, it set up “new depots or [bought] them from cooperatives in addition to acquiring new trucks.”

The arrival of diesel tractors after 1970 necessitated the installation of “underground reservoirs on farms,” and the Central opened gas stations to better reach rural customers. “In 1974, the petroleum distribution network included 58 cooperatives, 12 Fédérée centres, and 75 gas stations.” As such, Sollio became “the



Sonic's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

► Cooperative members in front of co-op gas station, c. 1980.



largest petroleum organization in the province” after large companies that owned refineries and importers of finished products.

Sollio pursued diversification in the sector by selling heating equipment and purchasing a propane business in Upton in 1968. “This fuel [was] used to heat henhouses and hog barns and to dry corn. It [was] also used by dairy plants until the energy crisis in 1973.”<sup>95</sup>

## Relations with the government

The arrival of Jean Lesage's Liberal government in 1960 was a welcome development for Sollio and agricultural cooperatives. A former leader of the cooperative group was named Minister of Agriculture, setting the stage for a productive relationship. A trained agronomist who had been active in the cooperative movement in Abitibi, Alcide Courcy was sensitive to the issue of development. "In 1961, he had the law [amended] to increase the budget earmarked for loan guarantees from \$300,000 to \$1 million. This additional governmental support [aimed] specially to promote the concentration of cooperatives on a regional basis in order to increase their efficiency."<sup>96</sup> Sollio then obtained loans from the predecessor of the Société générale de financement. In 1967, the April report was tabled. It set out a vision for agriculture that made the modernization of farms the core priority.

### **THE APRIL REPORT AND THE MODERNIZATION OF AGRICULTURE (1967)<sup>97</sup>**

In the early 1960s, the Lesage government was cognizant of the role of agriculture in a changing Quebec society. A Royal commission of inquiry was formed and presided over by the director of the École d'agriculture de Sainte-Martine, Nolasque April. Its report was in favour of increasing crop and livestock yields, supported by land drainage, and the use of mechanized work to improve soil conditions. It also encouraged the use of fertilizer and chemical pesticides to maximize yields. It was imperative to modernize farms and related infrastructure in order to make agriculture a major component of Quebec's economic development.

In 1968, to improve its capitalization, Sollio obtained amendments to its incorporating act.<sup>98</sup> "The main amendments [regarded] authorized capital, which [went] from \$10 million to \$20 million." Until 1970, the Department of Agriculture audited the financial statements of cooperatives. This responsibility was then transferred to Sollio, which tasked itself with standardizing annual reports, and "from this point [had to] be prepared by chartered accountants."<sup>99</sup>





# COOPERATIVE AGRICOLE - ST-JEAN PORT-JOLI



Saint Jean Port Joli,  
le 21 février 1961.



Monsieur Rolland Camirand,  
Ministère de l'agriculture,  
Québec.

Cher Monsieur,

Pour faire suite à l'explication donnée par votre inspecteur M. Belzile et à l'intention que nous avons de fabriquer de la caséine brut ce printemps, serait-il possible que vous nous émettiez un permis pour cette fabrication.

En vous remerciant à l'avance, nous demeurons,

Coopérativement Vôtres,

SOCIÉTÉ COOPÉRATIVE AGRICOLE  
ST JEAN PORT JOLI.

*Antonio Deschênes*  
Antonio Deschênes, gérant

A.D./m.d.

## BEURRE

MOULÉES  
LAIÈRE  
SEVRAGE  
CROISS. PORCS  
FINITION PORCS

DÉBUT POUSSINS  
CROISS. POULETS  
PONTE ORD.  
PONTE REPROD.  
PONTE CUÏE

DÉBUT DINDES  
CROISS. DINDES

GRAINS  
DE TOUTES SORTES  
RONDIS ET MOULUS

ENGRAIS  
CHIMIQUES

MACHINES  
ARATOIRES

TRACTEURS  
\*OLIVER  
\*RENAULT  
ESSENCES  
ET DIESEL  
CHARRUES HERSES  
SEMOIRS  
PRESSE À FOIN  
RÂTEAUX DE CÔTÉ  
TRAYEUSES COOP.

ANIMAUX  
EXPÉDITION  
TOUTES LES SEMAINES  
PORCS - BOEUF  
VEAUX - AGNEAUX.

## Communications and marketing

In the early 1960s, Sollio sought to change its communications strategy. It created a visibility plan for Legrade products in print media, radio and television. For petroleum products, the Fédérée brand was dropped in favour of “Sonic,” which would eventually appear on trucks and service stations.



### CREDIT UNIONS: FINANCIAL PARTNERS OF FARMERS

The founder of the *caisses populaires*, a form of credit union, was Alphonse Desjardins. He wanted these institutions to enable the public to amass savings and have access to credit. Desjardins believed this credit should be used for productive activities. The connection with farmers was therefore a natural one. “The farmer [needed] equipment capital to purchase livestock, agricultural machinery, and other tools; and operating capital, which is used to purchase goods with professional utility (fertilizers, seed grain, etc.), to pay workers and the costs of maintaining the farming family. All these credit needs, which meet the criteria of productive credit perfectly, [made] farmers major users of personal loans. In 1957, for example, they [borrowed] over \$12.5 million, three quarters of which (\$9.4 million) [was] as an acknowledgement of debt. These personal loans [constituted] 20% of the value of personal loans granted during the year by all credit unions in the province.”<sup>100</sup>



Cheese production at the Sainte-Claire plant.

### **LE COOPÉRATEUR AGRICOLE**

The first issue of *Le Coopérateur agricole*, a plain-looking newsletter without illustrations, was published in January 1948. It was eight pages long and initially was mainly intended for the leaders and managers of affiliated cooperatives. It stopped publishing in 1959. Subsequently, the cooperative addressed its members in *La Terre de chez nous*, which belonged to the Union catholique des cultivateurs (renamed the UPA in 1972). This collaboration, which had begun in 1938, took up a single page of the publication.

*Le Coopérateur agricole* rose from the ashes in 1972, Sollio's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year. Most contributors to the new *Le Coopérateur agricole* were members or employees of the cooperative network working on a voluntary basis. There were multiple objectives for the relaunch: to provide technical information to farmers; to create a journalistic record of the events, positive and negative, that marked the history of Quebec's agricultural cooperative movement; and especially, to bring agricultural cooperators closer to their institutions and the larger La Fédérée community while promoting cooperation.

The publication's first editor-in-chief, André Piette, joined the team in 1987. After his arrival, and with the help of Mario Dumais (general secretary of the Coopérative fédérée de Québec and manager of the magazine), *Le Coopérateur agricole* underwent a transformation. For the first time, a full-time employee was hired to manage advertising sales. The number of pages increased, and the quality of the paper improved. Freelance contributors wrote articles for the first time. New life was breathed into the magazine. In 1988, it finally included colour photographs with its articles.

Over the years, the magazine modernized and followed digital trends. Beginning in 1996, *Coopérateur* was posted online in its entirety on the website of the Coopérative fédérée. In 2014, it launched its first email newsletter, *Flash Coopérateur*, which allowed users to read the magazine's articles and agricultural news in digital format.

With a slogan that translates to "Your life, your business," *Coopérateur* was redesigned in 2015. "Agriculture is changing and modernizing," commented Guylaine Gagnon, its editor-in-chief. "It is now in the technological age. *Coopérateur* is following that trend while remaining focused on human beings."

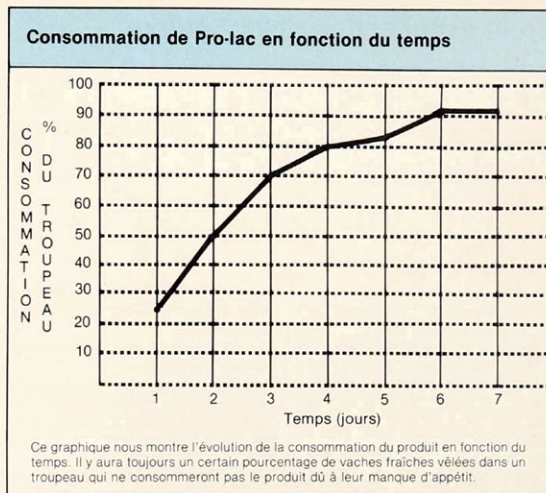
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## IN NUMBERS

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<b>Circulation</b>	14,000 copies per issue
<b>Frequency of publication in 2022</b>	8 issues per year
<b>Number of issues published</b>	555
<b>Number of pages published</b>	Over 25,000
<b>Number of words published</b>	Approximately 12,500,000

Tableau 2



les vaches consomment le maximum de fourrage, tel que recommandé par le programme alimentaire CO-OP Info-lait.

Ce produit, ayant une densité énergétique très élevée et étant destiné à des vaches à la limite de la consommation volontaire de matière sèche (c.v.m.s.), sera consommé de façon plus lente que la normale.

Pour les animaux alimentés de façon individuelle, on doit envisager une période d'adaptation d'une semaine, en augmentant graduellement la quantité jusqu'à un maximum de 2.5 kg (toujours en fonction du programme alimentaire) (tableau 2).

Lors du balancement d'une ration pour haute productrice avec le supplément Pro-lac, il convient d'augmenter le niveau de calcium dans la ration totale entre .8 et 1 pour cent

de la matière sèche ingérée. On augmentera ainsi la digestibilité de la ration totale, cela dû au phénomène de la saponification. Normalement, les savons ne seront pas digérés dans le rumen mais de façon post-ruminale, ce qui augmentera la disponibilité des acides gras pour l'ab-

sorption et l'utilisation en production laitière. ☛

\* Pierre Baril et Jean-Luc Laroche, agronomes, sont nutritionnistes pour les ruminants au secteur des productions animales de la Coopérative Fédérée.

## Roland Pigeon au Temple de la Renommée de l'Agriculture

C'est avec plaisir et fierté que nous informons nos lecteurs que feu Roland Pigeon sera officiellement intronisé au Temple de la Renommée de l'Agriculture le 19 novembre prochain, à Toronto. Deux autres éminents Canadiens ayant oeuvré dans le secteur agricole seront honorés à la même occasion. Il s'agit de MM. John Coulter Berry, de la Colombie Britannique et de Christian Tyndall Sutter, de la Saskatchewan.

La nomination de M. Pigeon au Temple de la Renommée constitue la reconnaissance de son important apport à l'agriculture de chez nous. Par ricochet, elle touche aussi directement les organismes au sein desquels il a oeuvré au cours de sa carrière. Nul doute que sa participation aux activités de la coopération agri-



cole, et particulièrement comme membre du Conseil d'administration pendant 21 ans et comme président de la Coopérative Fédérée pendant 11 ans, a contribué à influencer les personnes chargées de faire le choix des nouveaux membres du Temple de la Renommée.

Les coopérateurs agricoles ainsi que tous les producteurs agricoles du Québec doivent être fiers qu'un des leurs ait atteint un tel sommet. Comme nous, ils doivent cependant regretter que M. Pigeon ne soit plus de ce monde pour savourer pleinement un tel honneur.

Nous reviendrons sur le sujet après la cérémonie d'intronisation. ☛

LA DIRECTION

LE COOPÉRATEUR  
AGRICOLE

19

GEO. TANGUY & FILS LTÉE  
4489 PAPINEAU — MONTREAL — TÉL.: 527-4161

s agricoles occupent le premier rang, suivit du Minnesota et de l'Etat de New York. C'est au Minnesota que nous trouvons le plus grand nombre de coopératives, soit 938, suivit du V. C. sin avec 560 et du Texas avec 501.

Le rapport souligne que la consolidation des coopératives en unités plus grandes continue à se manifester même si la tendance a été moins forte qu'au cours de la période précédente.

En somme, lorsqu'on étudie les grandes tendances de la coopération agricole aux Etats-Unis, nous constatons rapidement qu'elles sont identiques à celles que nous pouvons observer au Canada et dans Québec depuis plusieurs années.

Et dans l'ensemble, tant chez nous qu'au Sud de la frontière, le taux de pénétration des coopératives se maintient au-dessus du taux de croissance de l'agriculture, ce qui s'explique au moins en partie, d'après le rapport américain en tout cas, par le fait que des coopératives acquièrent et intègrent des entreprises non coopératives.

## UN INCENDIE DÉTRUIT LA GRANGE ET LE TROUPEAU DE M. R. PIGEON

Dans la nuit du 10 au 11 mars, un incendie détruisait la grange-étable et une très grande partie du troupeau Ayrshire du président de la Coopérative Fédérée, M. Roland Pigeon. Les bâtiments de ferme, la machinerie agricole et 150 têtes de bétail sont disparus en fumée.

Monsieur Pigeon avait consacré toute sa vie d'éleveur à l'amélioration de la qualité d'un troupeau connu de tous les éleveurs Ayrshire de l'Amérique du Nord. Le fait est qu'au cours de sa carrière d'éleveur, M. Pigeon avait vendu des sujets d'élevage dans tous les coins du continent. En quelques minutes, l'oeuvre de toute une vie d'un éleveur de chez nous était anéantie.

Les agriculteurs qui s'emploient depuis des années à édifier un troupeau pur sang de grande qualité peuvent mesurer l'étendue du mauvais coup du sort qui afflige le président de la Coopérative Fédérée. Les amis de M. Pigeon et ses collaborateurs immédiats au sein de la coopération agricole québécoise partagent sûrement son affliction.

# 6

## **SOLLIO IN THE TIME OF AGRI-FOOD** (1976–1995)

This period was marked by the consolidation and specialization of farms—two trends that, though present in the past, were now picking up speed. Farms became businesses that were on one end of the field-to-table supply chain. Consolidation also meant fewer and fewer farms, and eventually, less and less political power for Quebec farmers.

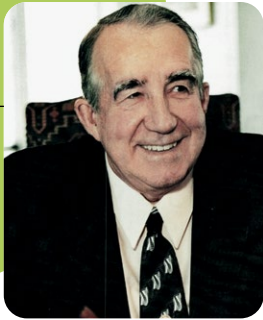
Dairy cooperatives started to become bigger players in the drinking milk sector. Dairy products and pork were having increased success in export markets. Meanwhile, Sollio was growing steadily through multiple purchases. As its reach expanded, its acquisitions started crossing borders into Ontario and the United States. This expansion always served the same goal: to give “Quebec farmers control over their procurement sources and over the processing and marketing of their products.”

In 1988, the Canada–United States Free Trade Agreement was signed to boost commercial trade with our neighbour to the south. The agricultural community could not afford to stay silent on this major issue that presented both new market opportunities and potential threats from new competitors.



The Turcotte & Turmel  
abattoir in Vallée-Jonction.

On the economic front, there were two noteworthy factors: first, a recession marked by high unemployment rates and, second, skyrocketing interest rates. The 1992 recession had serious consequences for Sollio. In addition to substantial investments, there was also the “cost of merging La Fédérée’s meat division with Groupe Olympia to form Olymel.” Our operations were simply not measuring up in terms of profitability, with “losses in the Unival poultry division alone reaching \$19 million in 1992.” That year, Sollio recorded a loss of over \$17 million. It was also during this period that environmental issues began to spark greater concern.



## PAUL MASSICOTTE

PRESIDENT FROM  
1992 TO 2003

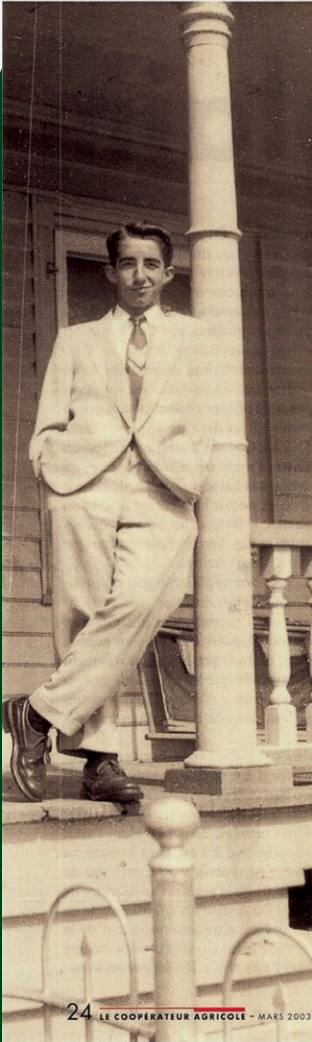
As president of La Fédérée from 1992 to 2003, Paul Massicotte (1939–2014) was exposed to the cooperative model very early in his career. While studying at the École d'agriculture de Sainte-Anne-de-la-Pérade, he helped found a student cooperative with some of his classmates. "At 15, he was appointed secretary of the Champlain UCC. At 20, he joined the ranks of Les jeunes ruraux."<sup>101</sup> He acquired his family farm in Champlain in 1966.

As a farmer, he was a member of the Société coopérative agricole de Champlain. In 1973, he joined the Board of Directors of La Fédérée as a regional territory representative. He was appointed to the Executive Committee in 1980, became Vice President in 1987 and was elected President of the organization in 1992.

In his lifetime, he also served on the boards of other corporations, including the Conseil de la coopération du Québec. "He was awarded the title of special commander of the Ordre national du mérite agricole, was inducted into the Temple de la renommée de l'agriculture du Québec, became a member of the Ordre du mérite coopératif du Québec et du Canada and received the Adélar-Godbout special merit from the Ordre des agronomes du Québec." This seed of cooperative spirit was eventually passed down through his family and flourished in his sons, Benoît, who served on the Sollio Board of Directors, and Roger, who has been President of Agropur since 2019.<sup>102</sup>



« C'est du sang coopératif qui coule dans mes veines. »



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et à corriger ses faiblesses pour devenir ce qu'il est aujourd'hui.

En 1966, Paul acquiert une ferme laitière avec sa conjointe, Lise Hamelin. L'entreprise comptait alors 55 suiveurs dont la moitié était de race.

Aujo  
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ainé  
tran  
sala  
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Riv

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laitière ou dans Massibec, l'entreprise de transformation.

Les fils ont tous leur résidence à moins d'un kilomètre de la maison paternelle. Ne croyez pas que c'est un hasard. Quand un voisin vendait sa

Coopérative fédérée de Québec [www.coopfed.qc.ca](http://www.coopfed.qc.ca)

# le coopérateur agricole

MARS 2003



Merci!  
**Paul  
Massicotte**

## Administration

Paul Massicotte always understood the importance of training the next generation, and as President of Sollio, he focused on cooperative education as a way of keeping the cooperative spirit alive. In 1993, Sollio participated in the launch of the Fondation pour l'éducation à la coopération et la mutualité. Since then, Sollio has remained highly involved in the foundation and has delegated representatives to our board of directors. In 1986, Sollio had 2,906 employees, and by 1992, after a period of rapid growth, we reached "a historic peak at 5,874."<sup>103</sup> That year, some positions had to be cut after experiencing financial difficulties, but in 1994, the workforce began to grow once more.

## New head office

Since 1960, Sollio's head office had been in Montreal, in the central market at the major intersection of highways 15 and métropolitaine. But the location was no longer meeting our needs and came with "high maintenance costs." Sollio wanted to "reintegrate the oil division into our head office" and sought to "protect itself from a rent increase, as the well-priced lease we had negotiated on the old building was up in 2000." So, in 1991, an all-new head office was unveiled: a ten-storey concrete and glass tower at the corner of De L'Acadie Boulevard and Legendre Street, of which Sollio occupied seven floors. It therefore remained in the Marché central area.

## Commercial operations

It was a time of many changes, fuelled by transformations in the dairy industry and adjustments in dairy farmer federations that would eventually lead to the creation of a single federation. "Forced to reduce production by 18% due to a change in the federal dairy policy, which sought to adjust the offer to match domestic demand,<sup>104</sup> industrial dairy farmers had no choice but to turn to new markets: specialty cheeses and unprocessed milk." The UPA had to mitigate tensions between the respective federations of industrial milk farmers (processing) and unprocessed milk farmers



 **Sollio**  
Grupa Cooperatif

(drinking milk). “The dispute was only resolved by negotiating with the cooperatives an agreement calling for, among other things, the creation of a single joint plan, the merger of the federations and the gradual integration of industrial dairy farmers into the lucrative unprocessed milk market, with the cooperatives controlling their milk.”<sup>105</sup>

In 1985, the Régie des marchés agricoles du Québec imposed an agreement establishing classes of milk (based on end use), each with its own guarantee of supply. From that point on, members could no longer know if their milk would be processed by their own cooperative,<sup>106</sup> which presented a major challenge to members’ traditional relationships with their cooperatives. This was remedied in 1987 with a new agreement that “restored some amount of balance between the cooperatives and the private companies, which had been favoured under the 1985 agreement.”<sup>107</sup> Playing both wholesaler and broker to the cooperatives until 1990, Sollio’s dairy division took off in Quebec, in the rest of Canada and internationally, selling skim milk powder, butter, traditional cheddar, gourmet cheeses and many other products. In 1989, “the division carried about a quarter of La Fédérée’s sales.”

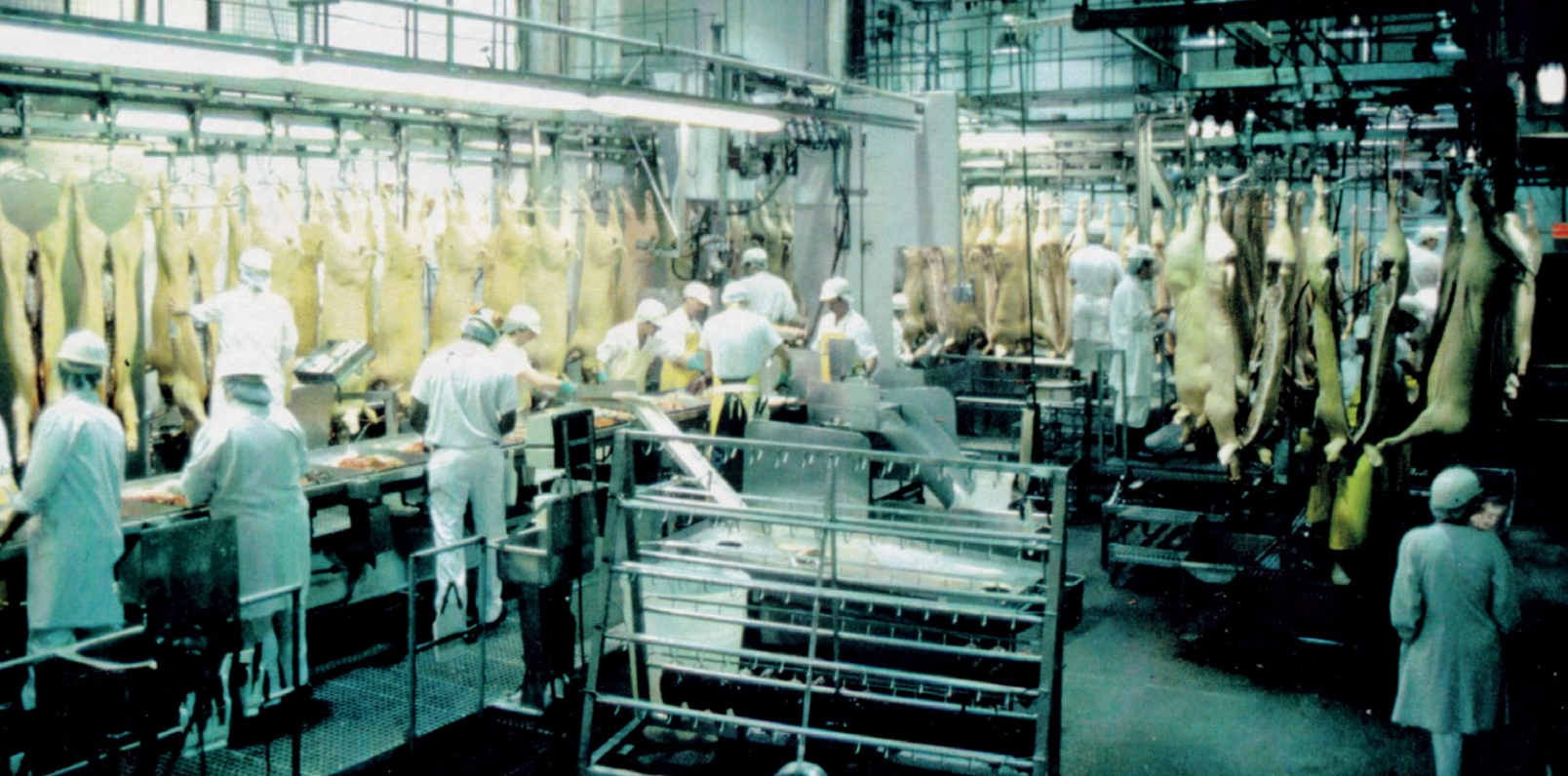
## **Lactel Group**

Lower population growth, combined with changing consumer eating habits and the impact of free trade agreements, began incentivizing cooperatives to work together. In 1990, Sollio and five dairy cooperatives came together to form a limited partnership: Lactel Group. Though Agropur also attended the preliminary discussions, it ultimately decided to partner with Purdel instead, creating Natrel Inc., which controlled the lion’s share of dairy distribution in Quebec.

Lactel Group remained the largest dairy wholesaler in Canada, as well as the number-one private exporter. At its inception, the company included 5,000 dairy farmers and had assets totalling \$166 million. “The new company had 11 plants, over 800 employees and sales of \$450 million—20% from exporting highly shelf-stable UHT milk, powdered milk, aged cheddar and other products. At the time it was created, Lactel Group was processing a quarter of all dairy produced in Quebec.” But the milk marketing agreement of 1990 put Lactel Group at a disadvantage, as it saw the annual volume of milk processed in its plants decline from

550 million litres in 1989–1990 to 300 million litres in 1993. “The directors of Lactel Group had signed this agreement thinking that the loss in raw material volume for regional plants would not be significant. They had come to terms with the idea of sacrificing a plant, in other words 80 to 90 million litres. Instead, the worst happened—the group lost 220 million litres in 1991–1992 alone.” A new agreement was signed in 1993, and the plants were then able to receive more milk annually, putting the organization back on the path to profitability in 1994 and for the next five years after.





## The origins of Olymel

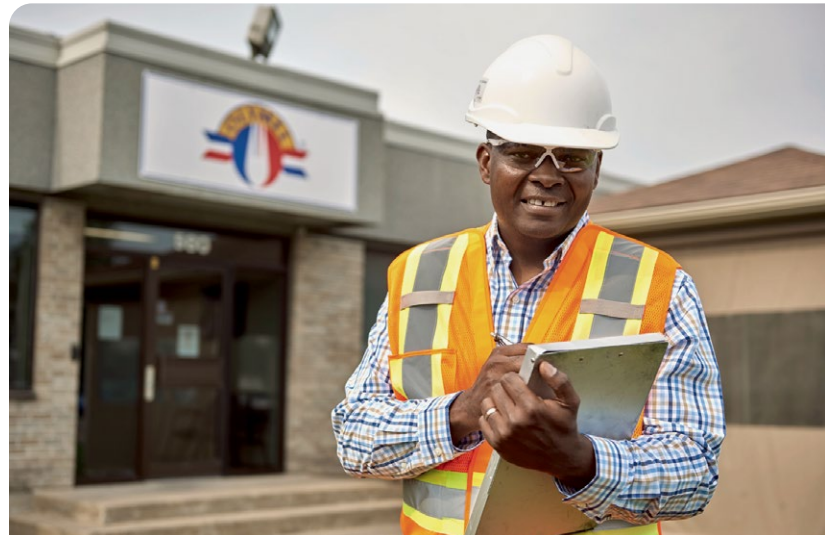
Since 1975, the division that would become Olymel had focused on “slaughtering, butchering and selling pork on the domestic and international markets.” The resulting sales were remarkable, and from 1976 to 1980 the number of pigs slaughtered in plants doubled. To meet demand, the Vallée-Jonction slaughterhouse was expanded, and a new one was opened in Princeville, in October 1980. “The Princeville slaughterhouse was high-tech. The old building it replaced became a salting and charcuterie operation, until that was shut down in 1983.” Sollio also owned a slaughterhouse in Bic and took over operations of “two struggling businesses located in Saint-Esprit-de-Montcalm and Saint-Jérôme.”

In 1991, to complement its Quebec operations, Sollio signed “an agreement in principle with Olympia Group Ltd. consolidating both companies’ assets into one limited partnership, named Olymel.”<sup>108</sup> By eliminating the competition between the two companies, Olymel became the leading exporter of Canadian pork. “In 1995, cross-border shipping represented 45% of total shipments, 75% of which

Workers at the Princeville abattoir.











was in the form of secondary-processing products. The United States and Japan were Olymel's biggest international customers."<sup>109</sup> In Japan, Olymel's volume represented no less than 45% of Canadian exports.

Two key investments marked Sollio's ambition to "consolidate the division's standing in the pork industry."<sup>110</sup> First, there was an additional investment in Ontario to acquire a majority share of "the Ontario slaughterhouse in Saint-Isidore de Prescott." And second, there was Sollio's commitment to "a 50% share in an Iowa slaughterhouse via its subsidiary CFM Sales Inc. This company already operated a distribution centre in New York City."<sup>111</sup> Sollio's meat division also had distribution centres in the cities of Anjou, Québec, Toronto and New York.



The new Princeville slaughterhouse, established in 1980

## **Bexel, Unival and Flamingo**

Sollio's poultry sector also saw many changes during this time, with numerous transactions taking place not only in Quebec but also in other parts of the country. Many new product brands also debuted. "Up until 1985, the poultry division of La Fédérée had been operating under the name 'Bexel'<sup>112</sup> and owned four slaughterhouses, a secondary processing plant, a distribution centre, a hatchery and several livestock farms."<sup>113</sup> The merger with Québec Poultry led to a number of positive outcomes, such as the combination of manufactured products and the specialization of the four slaughterhouses. Labour-intensive tasks in the slaughter line were made easier with automation, which "really picked up speed, leading to workers moving from the slaughter line to other phases of primary and secondary processing involving products with more added value." Sollio also acquired Galco Food Products Ltd., a company specializing in secondary processing, and the addition of its plant in the Toronto suburbs allowed Sollio to "double Bexel's poultry finishing capacity, constituting a major breakthrough into the Ontario market."

From 1985 to 1993, Bexel operated under the name Volailles Unival. In 1991, it acquired Tyson Canada Inc., Sollio's main competitor in this market, a major win that cemented its position. "In acquiring 28% of Tyson's slaughtering rights, [Volailles Unival] brought its total share up to 59%. Tyson's facilities were also much more advanced than Sollio's. The slaughterhouses in Joliette, Saint-Damase and Montreal (the last being for kosher chicken) remained in operation, while those in Mariville and Saint-Félix-de-Valois would shut down in 1989. The division also kept its locations in Berthierville and Saint-Jean-Baptiste-de-Rouville, as well as its secondary processing plant in Sainte-Rosalie."

But the new entity was off to a difficult start. In 1992, a drop "in poultry sales prices largely contributed to an industry-wide slump." This was one reason for Sollio's operating loss that year.

In 1993, the division changed its name once again, this time to Flamingo Foods. It also deployed recovery efforts to improve its standing—efforts that turned out to be successful. The organization managed to come out none the worse for wear in a demanding market. Ultimately, it was Sollio's ability to adapt to new market trends that allowed it to maintain, and even grow, the visibility of this division. "We

targeted consumers with specific cuts (such as strips and skinless thighs) that are pre-packaged in our plants and distributed in grocery stores under the brand 'Flamingo.' We then played the 'fun' card with our 'Festi-bouffe' line, which came in eye-catching packaging (nuggets, wings, chicken fingers, drumsticks, etc.)."

Over time, Sollio's role in the horticultural sector began to change. In 1975, the organization started acting as a wholesaler to its members in the horticultural business. Then, "following a planning process, major investments were made." Shortly thereafter, Sollio bought into two companies: one that packed and packaged vegetables and another that farmed decorative plants.

## **Sonic oil division**

In 1985, this division's direction began to shift slightly to ensure its development, while also improving user services and strengthening its distribution network to reach a larger clientele. Warehouses were drastically cut, while the remaining ones had their capacities increased. From 1972 into the early 1990s, they dwindled to only "16 in 1995."<sup>114</sup> The division also revamped its truck fleet, replacing six-wheelers with ten-wheelers.

Sollio bought stake in "Co-enerco, a company founded in 1982 involved in oil and natural gas exploration and production in western Canada." In the same vein, "in 1993, the division partnered with the Norcan Inc. consortium to finance a sea terminal. This investment enabled oil imports, putting Sonic in a better position to negotiate with its suppliers."

Sonic billboards began popping up all along Quebec roadsides. In 1990, Sollio made the strategic acquisition of "a block of 13 Esso stations, of which 10 were located in the Montreal area." The impact was significant: the investment "brought greater visibility to the Sonic brand in Montreal and brought the count of gas stations in the network up to 195." These gas stations employed roughly 650 people. In 1993, the Sonic group counted 138 employees and a fleet of about 100 delivery trucks.

Sollio members began expressing more responsiveness to environmental issues, leading to “the adoption of an environmental policy in 1994.” The oil division became an industry leader as “the first Quebec distributor to offer less polluting fuel created by blending gasoline with ethanol. The new fuel led to markedly higher sales volumes in 1995.”<sup>115</sup> One year after the product was launched, roughly sixty Sonic gas stations were offering ethanol fuel.

When the Saint-Henri mill exploded in 1980, its operations were transferred to the Joliette mill, which was updated through additional investments. However, the mill network had been procuring its mineral supply from Montreal since 1990. As such, the Saint-Romuald operation site was selected for the construction of “a new premix and minerals plant next to the existing mill it already owned.”<sup>116</sup>

### **THE SAINT-HENRI MILL EXPLOSION OF JANUARY 25, 1980**

At precisely 2:53 p.m. on January 25, 1980, the neighbourhood of Saint-Henri in Montreal was shaken when a grain elevator on Saint-Ambroise Street exploded. The Sollio-owned structure sustained heavy damage. As one journalist reported in *Le Devoir*,<sup>117</sup> “10 or so of the cooperative’s 24 reinforced-concrete silos, each 110 feet tall and 1 foot thick, were gutted from the top and bottom, while most lost their roofs.” At the time of the explosion, 42 employees were on site: Paul-Émile Grimard was killed instantly, and Henri Laprise succumbed to grievous injuries a few days later. Four other employees were injured. The ensuing investigation revealed that the accident was caused by the explosion of airborne dust.

### **Techno Champs: the largest agricultural research farm in Quebec**

Crop production sales were outstanding and showed strong growth over the previous 25 years. Likewise, “sales of seeds, fertilizers and crop protection products jumped from \$7.5 million to over \$100 million in 1995.” The proportion of total sales increased from 3.8% to 6.9%. Sollio had achieved these stellar results by

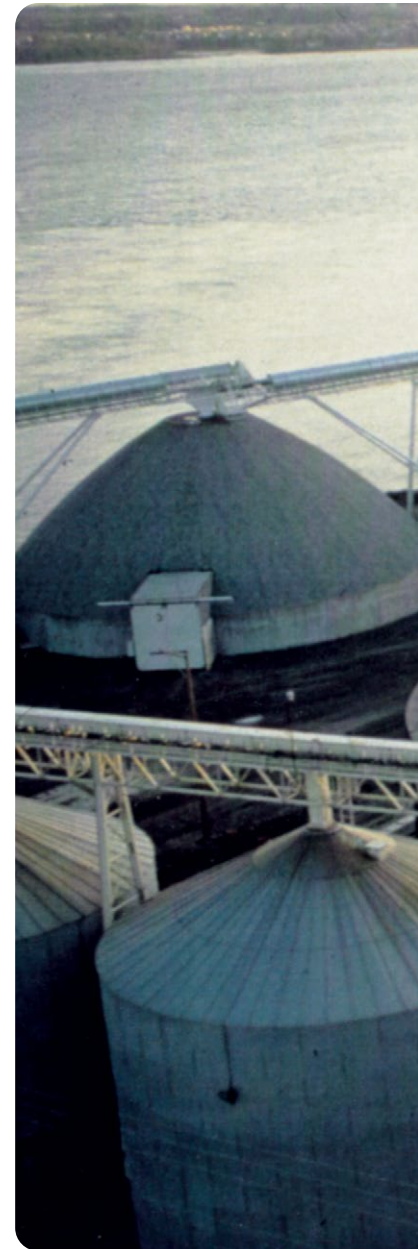
investing in research; it created Techno Champs, the largest private agricultural research farm in Quebec. Its mission was to “develop varieties and fine-tune crop management specifically adapted to the province’s agronomic conditions.” Sollio’s crop production research activities began in Sainte-Martine in 1979.

## Seed and fertilizer storage and distribution

Sollio had been using the facilities of Les Engrais Laprairie Ltd. for mineral fertilizer distribution, but in 1990, it traded up to a new ingredient storage and preparation centre in Sainte-Catherine. Having opened its doors in 1985, the centre served all plants in the metropolitan area. Another centre opened in 1991, in Sillery, servicing eastern Quebec. In addition to these, Sollio soon opened “eight rural prescription mixing centres.”<sup>118</sup> Meanwhile, seed preparation and crop protection product storage operations “were grouped in Longueuil in 1988”<sup>119</sup> and in Saint-Romuald in 1993.<sup>120</sup> In 1977, the federal and provincial governments announced joint funding programs for feed grain production, which led to the rise of “regional drying and storage centres.”<sup>121</sup> Sollio’s grain sector had to adjust to this new landscape. “Having supplied cooperative mills solely with grain from other provinces or abroad since the war, it had simultaneously begun marketing local production in recent years.”<sup>122</sup>

## Origins of the hardware sector

In 1977, Sollio decided to open its very first hardware distribution centre, in Trois-Rivières. The goal was to sell directly to farmers, who were frequently looking for hardware supplies at the agricultural supply stores run by the network’s member cooperatives. With big brands quickly taking over, Sollio wanted to give an equally recognizable image to the cooperatives running these hardware stores. It then purchased P. A. Gouin, a hardware and building material wholesaler, and launched Quincaillerie Co-op, which was renamed Unimat in 2003. “The name Quincaillerie Co-op had long been used to reflect the connection to La Coop fédérée. At the time, it also had a slogan, All under the same roof!” In the beginning, the hardware store essentially sold products for farmers, like tractors and tractor parts. The Quincaillerie Co-op brand was a success from day one! The division made \$18 million in sales in 1977. There was growing interest in hardware stores among cooperatives, who saw an opportunity to diversify their operations. Upgrades followed in the form of “an automatic telephone order system, truck deliveries to cooperatives





The Sillery distribution centre, jointly owned by Cargill and La Fédérée, a grain storage centre with 11 silos (mostly converted oil tanks) for a capacity of 75,000 tonnes. The conical warehouses, owned by the cooperative only, are used to store inorganic fertilizer components.



50 Years of Cooperation

BRANDS  
KITCHEN

CO-OP  
LIVESTOCK  
SPRAY

PESTICIDE  
PAPER  
PUMP


EAST PITTSBURGH CORPORATION

ALL PURPOSE  
DUST  
CO-OP  
CUTTING  
DISC

SLUR  
BAL  
CO-OP

CO-OP  
VEGETABLE  
GLASS





and colour catalogues.”<sup>123</sup> Mirroring this growth, the Trois-Rivières warehouse was expanded twice, in 1989 and 1995. The results spoke for themselves: “In twenty years, sales climbed from \$18 million to about \$100 million.”

### **ADVANCES IN AGRICULTURAL TECHNOLOGY (1976–1995)**

The early 1980s were marked by a recession and a dwindling number of farms. This was a blow to Sollio’s machinery sector. White brand tractors, of which La Coopérative fédérée had been a distributor, declared bankruptcy. Italian company Fiat filled the gap, supplying the cooperative’s distribution network with its Fiatagri line until 1994, when its contract was up. Over the decades, tractor technology had shifted into high gear. Power, size, comfort, efficiency, technology—these tractors looked nothing like the farm vehicles of yesteryear. But they were also more expensive! In response, agricultural machinery cooperatives began popping up. Originally a French initiative, these “libraries” allowed farmers to pool their resources and buy equipment together, sharing its cost, use and maintenance. The model worked so well for farmers that, in just a few years, agricultural machinery cooperatives had spread all over the province. Eventually, these groups became auxiliary members of Sollio Cooperative Group.

### **Management support services**

The on-farm supply group offered management services as a way for Sollio to help struggling cooperatives directly. In 1989, Sollio owned seven retail centres, now known as CACs (Centre agricole Coop). Management’s vision and philosophy for intervention was based on an overarching goal of “making these centres autonomous again, either by merging them with a cooperative [in the network] or by creating a new entity [an autonomous cooperative].” “In 1991, the Centre agricole de Saint-Barthélemy was the first to regain its autonomy under the name Agrivert,

Co-op hardware store interior, 1982.

coopérative agricole régionale.<sup>124</sup> In 1992, the CAC de Sherbrooke in Estrie merged with La coopérative de Coaticook to form La Coop des Cantons.<sup>125</sup> Other than helping struggling cooperatives, management support services—better known as the cooperative advisory support team—“also oversaw cooperative planning with a view to strengthening the network,”<sup>126</sup> particularly through the development of sophisticated management and benchmarking tools.

Today, the on-farm supply group remains a cornerstone of the organization. It generates roughly 30% of Sollio’s total business volume. Along with the network of cooperatives and CACs, the group has served all regions of Quebec since 1984.

Saved from bankruptcy by La Fédérée in 1982, the Saint-Barthélemy cooperative mill made a fresh start in 1991 as Agrivert.



The number of Sollio member organizations dropped from 179 in 1976 to 95 in 1995, with the decrease in the number of farmers being the leading cause of amalgamation. This was particularly true in central Quebec, where “La Coopérative agricole des Appalaches,<sup>127</sup> La Coop des Cantons [and] La Coopérative agricole du Pré-Vert.<sup>128</sup> Unicoop—formed by the Saint-Charles-de-Bellechasse mill and the Bellechasse and Chaudière-Etchemin cooperatives<sup>129</sup>—became the largest supply cooperative in the province. Other mergers resulted in more modest organizations, such as Coopplus, which was created by the SCAs of Champlain and Saint-Tite.”<sup>130</sup> Demographic data on cooperatives during this period spoke volumes. A few small cooperatives were still operating, mainly in the outer regions, but there could be no doubt that concentration was on the rise: “In 1988, the 30 largest cooperatives (including the eight regional dairy ones) represented 64% of members and 93% of sales by cooperatives.”

### **Supporting agricultural production**

Between 1975 and 1995, many different initiatives emerged in pursuit of a common goal: to sustain and encourage agricultural production. Among these was the Farm Income Stabilization Insurance program, known by its French acronym ASRA, which the Quebec government implemented in the mid-1970s.<sup>131</sup>

In 1978, the Parti Québécois took significant action to recognize and protect operational farmland by adopting the *Act respecting the preservation of agricultural land*. This signalled the government’s strong stance on the need to tackle the very real threat of urban sprawl encroaching on quality farmland.

## WHY AGRICULTURAL ZONING?

The *Act respecting the preservation of agricultural land* reflected awareness that action was needed to protect farming in Quebec. A study published in 1977<sup>132</sup> “concluded that, between 1964 and 1975, urban development in the Montreal area alone had resulted in the loss of over 20,000 hectares of high-potential farmland. The study also showed that, in addition to taking up land, urban development had a negative impact on soil structure caused by the dispersal of non-agricultural activities across the land. Its authors lamented the absence of any regional planning of land use.” The Act was later replaced by two others, the *Act respecting the preservation of agricultural land and agricultural activities* and the *Act respecting land use planning and development*.<sup>133</sup>

Two more measures were implemented: stabilization insurance schemes for several farm products—potato, pork, beef, grain—and joint plans. These were an effort to “adjust product offering to demand and set a fair price.”

In June 1992 in Trois-Rivières, the summit on Quebec agriculture was held around the theme “agriculture at a turning point” and reiterated the need to adjust assistance programs to better meet needs and account for opening markets. That same year saw the creation of the Filière agroalimentaire du Québec, a “group put together to discuss issues of future direction between all stakeholders in the agricultural and agri-food sector, as a structure for organizational dialogue. The Filière agroalimentaire covers activity related to production, processing, distribution and food service.”

Over those two decades, Sollio and the UPA presented a united front based on the “four fundamental pillars of agricultural policy in the country: marketing agencies, stabilization insurance, crop insurance and, finally, agricultural credit.”

## Trade liberalization

Since its inception, Sollio had never limited its scope of action to Quebec or even Canada. However, the period from 1976 to 1995 was marked by a powerful wave of trade liberalization to the point that the organization was compelled to take a position and publicly defend a certain number of rules and principles it felt were necessary to ensure the future of agriculture.

During the 1994 negotiations of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), agriculture was no longer left out of the discussion. As proponents of an open economy and the abolition of tariff barriers to stimulate trade, Brian Mulroney and his Progressive Conservative government launched free trade talks with Ronald Reagan in the United States and later with Mexico. An initial agreement was struck with the United States in 1989, followed by a second with Mexico in 1994.

“Pork farmers are probably the ones who benefitted most from the open borders, due to the abolition of the compensatory tariff. On the other hand, the GATT negotiations had resulted in an agreement calling for import quotas to be replaced with tariffs, which would be progressively lowered. This posed a major challenge for the dairy and poultry sectors.”<sup>134</sup> Still, the new rules set by the GATT and, as of 1994, the WTO “compelled Quebec farmers and the Quebec agri-food industry to become even more competitive.”

# 7

## THE IMPACT OF MARKET LIBERALIZATION (1996–2014)

The previous period of liberalization had set the stage for major changes in the agri-food industry. This, in turn, prompted the emergence of new agricultural exporting powers. There was now price competition between domestic and foreign agricultural products.

Furthermore, the agricultural sector could no longer ignore the growing concern for the environment and the increasing demands of consumers and the public in that regard. There was also increased recognition of the interrelationship between agriculture and health. This was undoubtedly one of the reasons for the growing interest in moderate pesticide use and organic farming.

In 2008, a financial crisis rocked the economy when the real estate bubble burst, causing the subprime mortgage crisis. This event truly demonstrated the resilience of cooperatives— compared to other types of organizations—when hard times hit.<sup>135</sup>

Two major meetings were held to take a closer look at the Quebec agriculture and agri-food industries. First was the Conférence sur l'agriculture et l'agroalimentaire québécois in 1998, then the Commission sur l'avenir de l'agriculture et de l'agroalimentaire québécois in 2006. These resulted in the Pronovost report, which made some hard-hitting observations—farmers were facing unprecedented levels of

debt; there were issues with the farm succession process; and psychological distress in the agricultural community was on the rise. Additionally, in 2013, with Sollio's support, Quebec adopted a food sovereignty policy.

The year 2000 saw a major first, as Sollio became the first cooperative organization to publish an annual cooperative report. Since then, the practice has been adopted by numerous industries.

## **Name change**

In 2004, the organization changed its name. La Coopérative fédérée de Québec became simply La Coop fédérée, rebranding visually as well. "La Fédérée and its network of affiliated cooperatives got fresh new branding rooted in the values of the past, while facing resolutely towards the future."<sup>136</sup> The new black-and-green logo depicting the lines of a tilled field would symbolize what had not changed since 1922—the organization's fundamental vocation.

## **Chrysalide**

In an effort to optimize Sollio's and the cooperatives' operations, a new business model was proposed in 2007: Chrysalide. Claude Lafleur, CEO of Sollio at the time, explained: "The new business model that we wanted to develop in the network was based on a more optimal division of roles between what we call the 'back office' and the 'front office.' When we say back office, this includes all manufacturing, warehousing, transportation, administration and management processes, while the front office essentially includes the sales force and customer service activities, which would continue to be carried out by local cooperatives."

In their 2013 strategic planning process, Sollio's executives focused on consolidating and integrating their achievements thus far. They hoped the organization would be "recognized as a leader in the Canadian agriculture and agri-food industries, as well as in the eastern Canadian retail sector." Sollio hoped to give itself the means to break into markets outside Quebec. But it had other challenges: "trade globalization, the decreasing number of farms, changing agricultural practices and the expectations of both farmers and the agri-food industry."

In the early 2000s, Sollio withdrew completely from the dairy industry, selling its shares in Lactel Group to Agropur. Its top priorities were now developing pork production, opening markets and pursuing activity in the poultry sector. Additionally, in two sectors—hardware and oil—products were now accessible to the general public. “Faced with the popularity of warehouse stores in urban centres, the cooperative network fell back on its advisory services and its proximity to customers in rural and semi-urban areas. It was during this period that several of the network’s cooperatives began offering auxiliary memberships to non-farming citizens.” The Sonic division extended the same offer in rural areas. Then, in 2014, Sollio acquired stake in BMR Group—a major move and first step towards eventual ownership.





In the seed sector, the organization was more active than ever, not only in sales but also in research, with the Techno Champs farm. And in the lab at subsidiary Laboratoire Agridirect, there was no shortage of “tests on hay, soils, feeds and inorganic fertilizers.”

Overall, the period was marked by significant growth for the organization. In 2011, Sollio had 101 affiliated cooperatives with 64,000 full members and 39,000 auxiliary or associate members, and sales for the entire network exceeded \$6 billion.



## DENIS RICHARD

PRESIDENT FROM  
2003 TO 2016

Denis Richard runs a cereal and pork farm in Leclercville, located in the Lotbinière Regional County Municipality. He began his career in the cooperative industry at the Parisville cooperative, of which he was president from 1985 to 1994. He was elected to the Sollio Board of Directors in 1993.

Reserved but skilled in communication, Richard shared many inspiring words with his colleagues, often saying, “from now on, we have to make products for the market, rather than simply putting products on the market.”<sup>137</sup>

He served for 13 years, one of the longest terms of any Sollio president. Beyond his duties on the CQCM Board of Directors, Richard was also involved in international affairs, including through the ACI.<sup>138</sup>

## **Administration**

After a decline in 1993 due to the organization's financial situation, Sollio's workforce began experiencing near continuous growth driven by the meat sector. More than 2,000 positions were created in five years. With 7,448 positions on October 31, 1998, "the Quebec company was at the forefront of non-financial Canadian cooperatives. It continued to grow its workforce, reaching the milestone of 10,000 employees in 2002."

Working conditions in hatcheries were improved with upgrades to the Victoriaville plant in 1999 and 2000, placing it "among the most efficient in Canada. Egg handling was conducted under strict cleanliness and sanitary conditions." In general, the working conditions negotiated by any of the major unions included "wages and fringe benefits for unionized employees that were sometimes above industry standards. In difficult times—as was the case in the pork and poultry sectors during the 1990s—these collective agreements weighed heavily on production costs at Olymel and Flamingo Foods. The employer was sometimes forced to request significant concessions from its employees." But, when unions are open to collaboration, it is always possible to get through tumultuous times and help people keep their jobs.

## **Cooperative and professional education**

Training and education efforts took off, beginning in 1993 with the hiring of Colette Lebel, a dedicated professional resource dedicated to cooperative training. Then, 1998 saw the creation of a new program "to train the network's elected representatives with cumulative credits." The program's end goal was "to support officers in their roles within their agricultural cooperatives, and [the program] was reviewed periodically by a monitoring committee to ensure that it would continue to meet needs." Then, in 2002—taking up an idea popular with large corporations—Sollio created a kind of corporate "university," dubbed L'Académie Coop.

## **L'Académie Coop**

Initial training consisted of four programs aimed at a range of positions: officers, hardware store clerks and managers, and agri-advisors. In 2004, a new module was added for "network managers, i.e., general managers of cooperatives and

sales managers.” Course content covered topics in business, operations and cooperative values. “The last of these dimensions was of particular interest to the Board of Directors of La Fédérée, which created a department of cooperative affairs in 2001 to strengthen the company’s identity.”

### **Défi-Coop**

In 1999, Sollio launched the Défi-Coop challenge, “an initiative designed for the future agronomists and agricultural technologists of Quebec. The competition’s successive editions have given students the chance to demonstrate their know-how to prospective employers, including agricultural cooperatives.”

### **Concours de la Coopérative Étoile**

In 2003, Sollio created the Concours de la Coopérative Étoile,<sup>139</sup> a contest intended to support affiliated cooperatives striving for excellence and to honour the richness of cooperation and good management practices. Finalists are selected on the basis of rigorous criteria including financial performance, human resources management and associative activities.

### **Commercial operations**

The full digital overhaul of the Saint-Romuald plant led to a change in its role, turning it from a simple mill into a kind of technical centre. “The new mineral and premix plant in Saint-Romuald, inaugurated in 1990, was on the cutting edge of technology.”

### **Sale of Lactel Group to Agropur**

Export markets began to close when the United States and New Zealand filed a complaint with to the World Trade Organization, which ruled that “Canadian dairy exports benefitted from subsidies that make them illegal.” A recovery plan was adopted, “but the members of the five regional dairy cooperatives decided to sell their shares in Lactel Group to the cooperative Agropur. The Sainte-Claire plant, specialized in UHT milk, was bought by Agrinove, an agri-food cooperative, which

tried in vain to revive it. The Chambord and Saint-Alexandre plants were closed in 2002 and 2004, while the Beauceville plant became part of Agropur.” Thus ended Sollio’s involvement in the dairy sector.

## Olymel

The meat and poultry sector underwent a remarkable expansion between 1995 and 2014, reflecting ambitions to expand its reach across Canada. Olymel’s progress in the pork sector required increased supply volumes. At the time, this was “facilitated by the new 1994 marketing agreement, which provided for pre-allocation based on historical market share. In 1999, joint tendering contracts were added, which allowed hog buyers to secure additional volume one month in advance, at a reference price based on that of the US. Meanwhile, quality was ensured in part through genetic selection carried out at Sogeporc.”

### **SOGEPORC**

“Attached to the On-farm supply division, Sogeporc is a swine genetic selection unit that came about through a partnership (which began in the early 1990s) between Sollio and about 20 active pork production cooperatives. In 1998, the entity also became a shareholder of Gène+, a [French] company that supplied high-quality genetic subjects in excellent health.” Since 2001, farrowing has been based in Notre-Dame-de-Lourdes (L’Érable Regional County Municipality). “Production is based on new biosecurity recommendations and carried out at three separate sites: farrowing, nursery and growing-finishing.”

In 2016, Gène+ merged with ADN, another French firm, to create Axiom, which would in early 2017 become<sup>140</sup> “the number one pig-breeding organization in [France].” This turned out to be a win for Sollio as well.

Olymel is based in Saint-Hyacinthe and also owned three cutting and de-boning plants in Vallée-Jonction, Princeville and Saint-Simon, as well as two secondary-processing plants in Granby and Magog. The Vallée-Jonction plant was the largest, with 1,200 employees. In 2001, Olymel acquired a plant in Red Deer, Alberta, “thanks to a \$50-million investment from SGF Soquia for a 17% share in Olymel SEC.” With a staff of 750, the plant processed 25,000 hogs per week and reduced transportation costs for pork sold on the Japanese market. The Red Deer acquisition boosted Olymel’s capacity to 120,000 hogs per week, making it a leading North American player.<sup>141</sup> Exports accounted for 54% of Olymel’s business volume, with the US and Japan as its main importers.

In the early 2000s, pork production was criticized for its impact on the environment, including the pollution of waterways and the odour from liquid manure application. “The huge public consultation held in 2002 and 2003 by the Bureau d’audiences publiques sur l’environnement aimed to lay the groundwork for sustainable pork production that would respect the environment and ensure peaceful coexistence between citizens and producers. Denis Richard, Sollio’s new president at the time, took the opportunity to communicate the efforts that had been deployed in recent years to mitigate odours and reduce phosphorus runoff from liquid manure.”<sup>142</sup> From 2001 to 2005, a moratorium was imposed on any new farrowing or growing-finishing facilities.

In the early 2000s, Olymel managers needed to respond to the combination of a strong Canadian dollar and more expensive production methods and labour costs in Canada versus the US. But “by restructuring activities in the fresh pork sector and developing the Cooperative Pork Network, they would manage to weather the storm.”

In 2003, Olymel consolidated its position in Quebec by partnering with Brochu Group to purchase “Aliments Prince, a limited partnership company based in Princeville—the largest bacon manufacturer in the country.”

Over the next few years, difficult market conditions brought a great deal of movement within the plants—sometimes investments, sometimes permanent or temporary closures. For example, “In February 2003, investments of more than \$80 million were announced to automate the slaughter line at the Vallée-Jonction plant and upgrade the Saint-Valérien and Princeville plants.” However, the Princeville

plant was forced to close for 18 months starting in 2004. It was finally able to reopen only after employees made wage concessions. The Vallée-Jonction plant alone had lost \$50 million in three years.” As for Red Deer, “this highly automated slaughterhouse was comparable to the best of its kind in the world. After some profitability problems, the Alberta plant recorded a surplus from 2008 to 2012.”<sup>143</sup>

In the late 2000s, in an effort to consolidate production, Sollio focused on creating a Cooperative Pork Network. A first step was taken in 2005 with the launch of La Coop certified pork. “Farmers who followed the certification program had to meet a rigorous, but flexible, set of specifications, which involved committing to a particular genetic profile, adopting a pre-established feed formula and abiding by certain livestock management principles.



In 2009, a new marketing agreement was negotiated with the Fédération des producteurs de porcs, establishing a useful link between the cooperative and its members. Olymel would receive hogs straight from “Sollio-affiliated cooperatives and maintain a direct link with the producers delivering them.”<sup>144</sup> This was an essential step towards Sollio’s creation of the “Cooperative Pork Network. The structure was officially set up in Drummondville, on April 21, 2011. The Cooperative Pork Network is a place for coordinating the activities of four links in the value chain: independent producers, cooperatives (as producers and suppliers of goods and services), Olymel (as buyer, processor and distributor of the finished product) and, lastly, La Coop fédérée.”<sup>145</sup> In the organization’s 2013 annual report, Denis Richard underscored what this commitment meant: “In remembering our historical mission and values, we concluded that we had no choice but to persevere and find a way to establish a resilient and successful cooperative pork production network.”<sup>146</sup>

In 1998, Flamingo Foods officially joined forces with Olymel. Flamingo Foods was able to leverage Tyson Food’s expertise in secondary poultry processing, in addition to that of the dietician Norbert Gagnon. Its main slaughterhouse was the Berthierville facility, which employed 370 people. “It is both a slaughtering and cutting plant. To meet customer demand, the slaughterhouse opted for air- rather than water-chilling technology for its poultry. In 1996, it became one of the first plants in the country to make this switch.” There was also a slaughterhouse in Saint-Damase that had 240 employees in 2000. It was rebuilt after a fire in 1996—a \$12-million investment—and began offering vacuum-seal packaging and automating some of its tasks. The second step in the production process was supplying “the Sainte-Rosalie plant, where the de-boning, secondary processing and packaging was done.” This plant “had ovens and could offer fully cooked products”—a growing market at the time. Olymel had been present in the Ontario market since 1989, when it had acquired Galco Food Products, and also had a plant in Bramalea, Brampton.

Meanwhile, the poultry sector was also restructured with a view to rationalization. “The Saint-Félix-de-Valois hatchery, which produced broiler chicks, was closed in 2008, and incubation was centralized at the Arthabaska provincial hatchery in Victoriaville.”<sup>147</sup> The latter was given the necessary resources to make it a leading facility.

## portrait de nos dirigeants

# Nadeau

Réjean Nadeau, le président-directeur général d'Olymel, a le profil des opérations qu'il dirige. C'est un homme d'action qui possède un sens naturel des affaires et une rapidité à prendre des décisions. Comptant plus de 20 ans à travailler au secteur des viandes de la Coopérative fédérée, il est manifestement l'homme de la situation!

Son père était commerçant d'animaux à Saint-Léon-de-Standon : il élevait du bœuf de boucherie, faisait de l'abattage et exploitait une boucherie à même son épicerie. Réjean a hérité d'un savoir-faire qu'il a adapté à une entreprise de plus grande dimension.

Il est le cadet d'une famille de trois enfants. Il est venu au monde sept ans après son frère Yvon, décédé à l'âge de 30 ans. Sa sœur aînée, Réjeanne, avec qui il entretient une bonne relation, se souvient de lui comme un enfant déterminé : « Dès sa naissance, il s'imposait. Ma mère a dû embaucher une aide pour le bercer la nuit, il se réveillait tout le temps. Déjà, il aimait être dans les bras des femmes », dit-elle en riant.

Il est aussi très près de ses deux enfants, Frédéric et Catherine. Frédéric travaille comme chargé de compte chez Olymel et Catherine est designer à Montréal.

En tant que dernier de la famille, une partie de son destin était déjà tracé : « Il était clair pour mes parents que j'allais faire des études », raconte-t-il. Réjean fait donc son cours classique au collège privé de Lévis, puis complète sa formation à l'Université Laval en relations industrielles.

Depuis le pensionnat, vers l'âge de 12 ans, le gars de la campagne passe ses étés chez sa sœur à Montréal. Marc, son mari, possédait un garage de mécanique automobile et le jeune y travaillait. D'ailleurs, tout le temps de ses études, il a travaillé tour à tour comme aide-mécanicien, cuisinier et chauffeur de camion, et ce, sans jamais compter ses heures. « C'est mon père qui m'a inculqué le sens du travail. »

Fraîchement diplômé, il travaille au ministère de la Justice du Québec, puis aux magasins La Baie. En 1976, il est nommé directeur du personnel à Québec Poultry, une entreprise nouvellement acquise par la Coopérative fédérée de Québec, qui comptait les usines de Saint-Jean-Baptiste, Berthierville, Sainte-Rosalie ainsi qu'une trentaine de fermes d'élevage.

Deux ans plus tard, les activités de Québec Poultry sont fusionnées avec la Division avicole de la Fédérée, qui possédait alors les usines de Marieville et de Saint-Félix-de-Valois. Graduellement, on confie au directeur du personnel d'autres responsabilités du point de vue de la logistique du transport, de l'approvisionnement, de la production et des ventes.

Il n'a que 34 ans, lorsqu'il est nommé directeur général de la Division avicole. Sous sa direction, on acquiert le Groupe Doria Boisjoli, une entreprise d'élevage et de distribution de moulées.

Après avoir longtemps été sollicité, en 1988, il accepte un poste de vice-président de la Division des services alimentaires chez Métro-Richelieu. Il occupe ces fonctions pendant deux ans et devient consultant spécialisé en redressement dans les domaines de la transformation alimentaire, du transport et de la distribution.

Au moment où la Fédérée fait face à des difficultés financières, en 1992, on le reconquiert pour redresser la Division avicole, alors Unival, et qui deviendra Flamingo. En procédant à des changements organisationnels, à une rationalisation des opérations et au redéploiement des stratégies de vente et marketing, il réussit le coup de force.

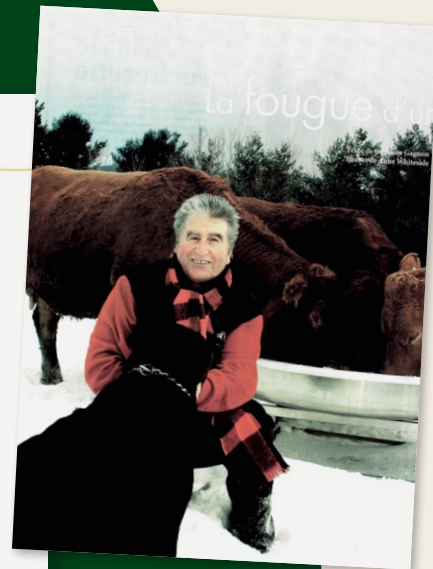
En 1996, il fait le saut chez Olymel et en 1998, il se retrouve à la tête de Olymel-Flamingo, soit tout le secteur des viandes de la Coopérative fédérée de Québec. Sa mission : intégrer les deux divisions et en tirer la meilleure synergie. Encore une fois, il démontre sa connaissance du secteur, sa rigueur et son savoir-faire.

Assés le cap de l'an 2000, l'heure est aux projets d'expansion. L'achat de Red Deer et la participation dans Aliments Prince ont été des occasions d'affaires qu'Olymel ne pouvait pas laisser passer. « Réjean connaît et analyse très bien l'industrie des viandes, commente Paul Beauchamp, premier vice-président chez Olymel. Il a du flair pour déceler les affaires qui conviennent à l'entreprise, autant pour les occasions d'acquisition que pour des nouveaux produits qu'elle pourrait offrir. » L'acquisition de Red Deer est un exemple de réussite. « Après y avoir importé notre savoir-faire, elle s'avère une des usines les plus efficaces », souligne le président-directeur général.

« Le succès de Réjean vient, entre autres, du fait qu'il sait bien s'entourer », lance Pierre Gauvreau, directeur général de la Coopérative fédérée de Québec. Il sélectionne des gens différents de lui, des choix non traditionnels. Son flair pour les affaires est indéniable et c'est un entrepreneur plus qu'un gestionnaire. »

En négociation, il sait aller chercher le maximum pour conclure une affaire avantageuse pour l'entreprise sans risquer de briser le deal. En plus, les discussions se font toujours de façon agréable. « C'est un plaisir de le voir faire », commente Alain Garneau, directeur du Contentieux à la Coopérative fédérée de Québec.

C'est un homme au franc parler, soulignent la plupart de ses collaborateurs. Les objectifs et les directives sont toujours clairs.





son ami Jacques Racicot, avec qui il passe beaucoup de temps parce qu'ils habitent la même ville, raconte : « C'est un gars exceptionnel pour son équipe. Quand arrive le temps des Fêtes, il me dit souvent : il faut que je parte, il y a une soirée au bureau et mes employés vont être là. » Il est du genre à faire la tournée de ses installations, à parler à son personnel à qui il porte un grand respect.

« À première vue, il semble froid, mais quand on le connaît mieux, on découvre quelqu'un de chaleureux », décrit Francine Lambert, son adjointe quand il est arrivé à Québec Poultry.



Le chef de la Division des viandes est aussi un homme raffiné. « On peut parler d'art, de littérature et de peinture avec lui », souligne Paul Beauchamp. Il aime la bonne cuisine – il est d'ailleurs bon cuisinier – il apprécie la musique de toutes origines et le bon vin. Mais il a aussi un côté plus rustique. Réjean aime les *pick up*. Il a ce vieux *Dodge Ram* des années soixante-dix qu'il a remonté et réparé à

plusieurs reprises. Il s'est acheté un *Ford* neuf récemment, mais pas question de se défaire de son *Dodge*. « Je pense que le nouveau *pick up*, c'est pour ménager le vieux », lance Paul Beauchamp en riant.

Particulièrement attaché à la nature et aux animaux, le dirigeant de 53 ans a acquis, il y a quelques années, une ferme à Saint-Paul-d'Abbotsford où il élève une douzaine de vaches pour la production de veaux d'embouche. Son fidèle compagnon, Jules, un chien labrador, saute dans le *pick up* chaque fois que son maître se rend à la ferme ou à Saint-Léon, sa ville natale.

Il possède également un cheval, Jim, que son ami Robert Bienvenue loge dans son écurie. M. Bienvenue était un des propriétaires de Groupe Olympia au moment où cette entreprise a été acquise par la Coopérative fédérée, et fusionnée avec Turcotte Turmel pour former Olymel. « Réjean m'avait demandé de remplacer Yvon Mercier, quand ce dernier quittait la vice-présidence des opérations. C'était la première fois que j'avais un patron étranger. Ensemble, nous avons développé une grande complicité. Réjean est exigeant, mais c'est valorisant de travailler pour lui parce qu'il sait reconnaître les qualités et le potentiel d'un individu. »

Sa résidence principale est à Rougemont : une maison centenaire agrémentée d'un grand jardin fleuri. Il a converti la grange en salle de réception. Il y reçoit ses amis et y tient même quelques fois des réunions de bureau.

Denis Tousignant est un ami de longue date. Réjean et lui se sont connus au collège : « On tenait nos surveillants assez occupés. » Il se souvient des nuits passées avec son chum à arroser la patinoire de l'école. Ils apportaient toujours des boissons pour se réchauffer. Après le collège, ils se sont perdus de vue pour se revoir à la porte d'une classe de l'université. Sans le savoir, ils avaient fait le même choix de programme.

Quelques années plus tard, Réjean organise une amicale pour réunir ses amis. Depuis, chaque année au mois d'août, il organise cette fête qui rassemble tous ceux qui comptent pour lui. Il fait la cuisine et reçoit généreusement ses invités.

Le travail à fond de train, les voyages, les rencontres entre amis, Réjean est toujours sur le pied de guerre. Pour soutenir ce rythme effréné, il possède une santé de fer. Quand on lui demande comment ça va, il répond toujours « comme un jeune homme ». Il n'est pas celui qui va au gym pour se tenir en forme. Il est plutôt du genre à demeurer actif en faisant des travaux à la ferme, en marchant, en pratiquant le ski alpin ou la natation. Ceux qui le connaissent bien savent qu'il sait profiter de la vie. « Il s'amuse aussi fort qu'il travaille », lance Serge Michel, vice-président senior chez Olymel. En fait, il a adopté la devise de ne jamais dire un jour : « J'aurais donc dû. » ♦

In 2006, Sollio struck up a partnership with “two cooperatives in the Lower St. Lawrence—Dynaco Group in La Pocatière and Purdel in Rimouski—as well as Westco Group in New Brunswick [to] acquire part of the assets and production quotas of Ouellet Agri-Production, also in New Brunswick.”<sup>148</sup> Under the name of Volailles Acadia, the partners produced “6.4 million kilos of chicken and turkey at five sites in Saint-François-de-Madawaska, Clair and Saint-Hilaire. Spread between about twenty henhouses, Volailles Acadia’s production made up 16% of the total volume allocated to New Brunswick, and the company owned a quarter of the province’s turkey farms.”<sup>149</sup> Two more partnerships were signed to consolidate the New Brunswick poultry industry, and a major agreement was reached in 2008.

Olymel—in partnership with the “Westco Group through a company called Sunnymel”—opened a chicken slaughterhouse in Clair, Ontario for \$50 million. With a team of 200 employees, the plant had a “processing capacity of 450,000 chickens per week” and annual sales of up to \$120 million. The facility was able to serve the entire Maritime market.

Sollio also had other holdings in the industry. It owned a number of broiler farms from companies acquired by its former division Bexel. Over two decades, from 1995 to 2014, Olymel carved out a place for itself in the wider Canadian market. In addition to dominating the Quebec pork industry, it “accounted for more than a quarter of the country’s hog slaughter volume and 31.5% of Canadian exports.” In poultry slaughter, it ranked second in the country and was especially active in Quebec, New Brunswick and Ontario.

Clearly, it was no mistake to market chicken and turkey to Quebec consumers—public demand jumped 17% between 1994 and 2000, and Olymel took up a dominant position. At the turn of the 2010s, production was reorganized with a view to rationalization, resulting in layoffs and a transfer of production.

The Unidindon Inc. plant in Saint-Jean-Baptiste-de-Rouville was run by a joint venture formed in November 1996 by the Saint-Anselme/Saint-Damase poultry cooperative group (now Exceldor) and Sollio (via Flamingo Foods). In the early 2000s, it was the largest in the country, with “over 100,000 turkeys slaughtered there per week—a total of 16% of all Canadian production.”

Hoping to make gains in productivity and improve product quality, Olymel invested in its plants. In 2007, turkey de-boning was transferred “from the Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu plant to the Unidindon Inc. plant in Saint-Jean-Baptiste-de-Rouville.” In 2009, investments were made in the Sainte-Rosalie and Saint-Damase plants. “In 2011, the Berthierville slaughterhouse was updated with smart cutting equipment that enabled it to adapt chicken cuts to customer needs.”<sup>150</sup>

Sonic’s 1994 initiative to sell ethanol fuel at its gas stations was a resounding success. By 1996, it had a total of 90 gas stations. In light of buoyant demand, a new ethanol production plant was built in Varennes in 2007.

### **THE 1998 ICE STORM**

With confidence and a sense of solidarity indicative of its cooperative roots, Sonic braved the ice storm of January 1998. The Quebec region of Montérégie was hit especially hard, earning it the nicknames “Triangle of Darkness” and “Ice Triangle.”

After a power outage struck its Saint-Hyacinthe warehouse, Sollio managed to procure a generator and was able to “continue serving, on a priority basis, seniors’ residences, hospitals and public safety service providers (municipalities, fire departments, ambulance services, police forces, armed forces) as well as emergency shelters and food banks.” Sonic also stepped up to supply petroleum products to farmers and commercial clients, who were doing their best to keep up “their regular activities on generator power.” Thanks to the unwavering commitment of Sonic employees, the organization was able to “remain the primary distributor of petroleum products for Montérégie and Montreal’s South Shore throughout the crisis.” However, this came at a cost: the organization saw losses totalling “\$3.3 million (in product loss, generator loans, additional labour costs, shortfall, etc.).”

# le COOPER agricole



**Dossier verglas**  
La force de la coopération

## Encart

Ferme Techno Champs  
Résultats des essais 1997

FÉVRIER 1998



## Nos coopératives dans la tempête de verglas

**A**u moment d'écrire ces lignes, plusieurs de nos coopératives situées au cœur de la région sinistrée s'activent à réorganiser leurs opérations en vue de satisfaire, par des moyens alternatifs, les besoins les plus criants de nos sociétaires.

Livrer du pétrole et de la moulée, remettre en marche les abattoirs, préserver les inventaires dans le domaine des viandes et des produits laitiers dont la valeur excède les 100 millions de dollars, telles sont les tâches les plus urgentes actuellement.

À ce moment, nous pouvons déjà observer que le réseau coopératif a accompli des prouesses remarquables pour satisfaire aux besoins les plus pressants comme on pourra le constater en lisant ce numéro du *Coopérateur*.

Nous avons évidemment, comme tant d'autres opérateurs, à surmonter certains obstacles qui sont dans certains cas infranchissables : si une route est fermée, nous ne pouvons évidemment dans ce cas approvisionner nos sociétaires et nos clients. Si la direction de la protection civile réquisitionne nos équipements ou nos produits (entre autres pétroliers) pour des fins jugées prioritaires, nous devons collaborer. Mais en général, là où nous pouvons livrer des marchandises, les coopérateurs ont pu être approvisionnés.

Plusieurs employés et gestionnaires de la Coopérative fédérée se sont dévoués sans compter pour nous aider à traverser cette épreuve.

Là où les meuneries coopératives ne pouvaient opérer, comme dans la région de Saint-Hyacinthe et de Granby, nous avons pu sécuriser l'approvisionnement en moulée grâce à l'apport d'établissements situés en dehors de la zone sinistrée (meunerie de Joliette, de Saint-Romuald et meunerie de la Société coopérative agricole des Bois-Francis, entre autres).

Pendant plusieurs jours, notre poste de réserve de produits pétroliers à Saint-Hyacinthe était le seul en opération dans le triangle situé au cœur de la région sinistrée.

De ces événements, on peut tirer bien des enseignements. Ils nous portent à réfléchir à notre vulnérabilité face à une interruption prolongée d'approvisionnement en électricité. Cette réflexion nous incitera sans doute à prendre des moyens pour diminuer cette vulnérabilité.

Ces événements ont également permis de constater la force du réseau coopératif. Nous avons su nous réorganiser pour faire face à la tempête et permettre à nos sociétaires de traverser cette épreuve en minimisant les dommages. Bravo et merci à tous ceux qui ont mis l'épaule à la roue en ces circonstances difficiles.

J'en profite également pour féliciter les autorités municipales, québécoises et canadiennes et la direction d'Hydro Québec, qui ont su collaborer pour gérer cette catastrophe avec compétence. J'ai également, comme vous tous, été touché par la solidarité manifestée par nos concitoyens envers les sinistrés. Cette situation est difficile à vivre pour tous ceux qu'elle touche. Je sais qu'elle l'est particulièrement pour les agriculteurs. Merci à tous ceux qui ont aidé nos confrères sinistrés, en particulier par des prêts de génératrices. J'espère qu'au moment de lire ces lignes, tous auront récupéré l'électricité pour pouvoir vaquer normalement à leurs occupations.

**Paul Massicotte**  
Président de la Coopérative fédérée de Québec

The ice storm highlighted the benefits of another fuel source at Sonic's disposal: propane gas. One result of the unprecedented weather event was that propane "became more popular for different uses, including as supplemental home heating in rural areas where natural gas was not available." To meet this newfound need, the organization turned to its three locations in Saint-Hyacinthe, Quebec City and Brossard, as well as a satellite office in Joliette. Some years later, in 2008, Sollio "partnered with Nutrinor Cooperative to form Propane Québec Inc. This became one of the largest propane gas importers in Quebec. In addition to supplying its two shareholders' customers, it became a vendor for several independent distributors.<sup>151</sup> Over the following years, it kept its ear to the ground in search of business opportunities and "would acquire stock in Propane Mont-Laurier Inc. in 2013 and Propane 2000 in Varennes and Sorel in late 2014."<sup>152</sup>

An innovation was taking shape within the Sonic network: the DEQ concept, a combination convenience store, gas station and hardware store. On October 21, 2001, "the Sainte-Agathe-de-Lotbinière location of the Société coopérative agricole La Seigneurie opened the first point of sale combining a co-op hardware store, a corner store and a Sonic gas station." In 1998, Sonic became Quebec's first independent distributor, with sales of over \$200 million—10% of Sollio's total business volume.

Although the Sonic gas station count remained stable until 2014, the number of fuel-oil distributors went up due to various acquisitions, including part of the Irving fuel-oil and diesel distribution network in Quebec and other companies in Victoriaville, Saint-Hyacinthe and Beauce. In 2013, Sollio acquired fuel-oil distributor Bouthillier-Rioux, further honing its position in the Greater Montreal area.

Keeping up its momentum in the low-pollution energy sector, on April 23, 2008, Sonic "announced that it would begin distributing biodiesel in 97 of its gas stations in the Greater Montreal area, the Laurentians, Montérégie, Lanaudière, Mauricie, Centre-du-Québec and Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean. The Norcan terminal in Montreal, a strategic choice for Sonic's activities outside of oil supply and storage, "became an essential element of our strategy, serving as a central kitchen where the ingredients for many of our green fuels were mixed."<sup>153</sup>

The on-farm supply division did not go unaffected by the decreasing number of farms. Still, it remained a key link in the value chain, as the “main supplier of goods and services to local and regional cooperatives.” Despite its sizeable annual business volume, the division felt the impact of new farmer practices, such as “on-farm feed manufacturing, caps on fertilizer sales, tighter pesticide standards and the purchase of machinery from farms ceasing their operations.” The organization decided to “divest from inorganic fertilizer plants in favour of its affiliated cooperatives.”

Sollio also invested in the quality of its mills, an important part of on-farm supply operations. “The Saint-Romuald premix and minerals plant began its quality overhaul in 1997 and obtained ISO 9001 registration in December 1998; the mill became HACCP certified on October 2, 2002.”

Driven mainly by research at Cooperative Research Farms, in the 1990s, Sollio began focusing on biosecurity, “from hatching egg production farms to slaughterhouses.” In 1998, the organization followed through on its plan to update its poultry farms, investing \$4.3 million in the Victoriaville provincial hatchery. This investment “doubled its capacity, bringing it up to 35 million broiler chicks per year (\$45 million, including production at the Saint-Félix-de-Valois hatchery). The hatchery was fully computerized for strict sanitary control against pathogens, including salmonella.” The increased production capacity propelled the Victoriaville hatchery to the number-two spot among Quebec hatcheries and made it “one of the most modern in Canada.”

The on-farm supply division needed to stay on the cutting edge of crop production know-how, “so that farmers could achieve the best possible performance” while also accounting for “the public’s growing concern for agro-environmental issues.” Fertilizers were mainly supplied by CF Industries—at the time, one of the largest inter-regional cooperatives in North America. Sollio had warehouses in three distribution centres: one in Côte-Sainte-Catherine, on Montreal’s South Shore, one in Montreal and one in Quebec City’s Anse au Foulon.







## **The PASSION program**

A major innovation built on information technology, “the PASSION program (precision soil analysis program), unveiled by Sollio in May 1997, ushered in a new era of agriculture. It used global positioning system (GPS) soil mapping to determine the areas of fields where fertilization is needed, making it possible to optimize fertilizer application. This breakthrough marked the beginning of precision agriculture.” Although farms were largely concentrated in a few key agricultural sectors, such as pork and dairy production, field crops, such as corn, soy and cereals, were experiencing such a boom that the number of farms mushroomed. “The number of [field crop] farms increased from 850 in 1971 to 3,850 in 2011. The average size of these farms more than doubled from 1981 to 2011.”

## **The fight against weeds, pests and fungi**

Crop protection was an important issue of the day. For years, Sollio had partnered with Interprovincial Cooperative Limited (IPCO), a Winnipeg-based inter-cooperative initiative similar to a CRF, but for crop protection products. However, with the increased awareness of the risk of handling such chemicals, “custom application was developed [for farmers] to reduce issues related to hazardous material handling and empty container recovery. In 2002, between 10 and 20% of La Fédérée’s pesticide sales were made through custom applications, a service offered by 36 cooperatives.”

## **Evolution of the Techno Champs farm**

Sollio continued its research and experimentation at the Techno Champs farm in Sainte-Rosalie, aiming to develop new varieties. In 1996, another research centre was added, this time in La Pocatière, where the first agricultural school in Quebec was founded in the late 19th century. “The goal was to supply cooperatives with quality, high-yield seeds that were suited to Quebec conditions.” Hybrid and cultivar testing was conducted not only on the research farm’s own plots but also in collaboration with partner farms. The knowledge gained from this work was then shared with member producers in the pages of *Le Coopérateur agricole*.

In 1995, the farm started a research project with Professor Claude-André Saint-Pierre from Université Laval, aiming “to create new (GMO-free) barley varieties suited to eastern Quebec, with good agronomic yields and fusarium resistance.” The work was a success, leading “to the marketing of around ten varieties of barley. They were highly anticipated by pork producers, which meant an increase in La Coop fédérée’s market share.”

Far from operating in silos, the “Techno Champs farm collaborated on projects with partners in academia and government.” “In 1996, for instance, it worked with Université Laval on Céréales 2003, a project that used biotechnology to develop new cultivars in the lab. In 1997, the Cryptolait project was launched with the Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada research centre in Sainte-Foy. Its goal was to select high-yield alfalfa cultivars suitable for growing in Quebec winters.” The farm was also involved in developing innovative products, such as “Hyper P, a granular phosphorus source”<sup>154</sup> and, through the GéoPhyte project, tools for “analyzing the yield maps of various productions.”

Sollio also kept pace with changes in the seed market in the last quarter of the 20th century. The organization began planting cereals (mostly corn) and oilseeds (soy) in fields formerly dedicated to forage crops (hay and feed corn). Facing competition from major players such as Pioneer (a DuPont subsidiary) and NK (a Syngenta subsidiary), Sollio increased its market share. By 2002, “it held about 10% of the corn seed market (hybrids derived from parent lines owned by multinationals) and 25% of the soy seed market.”

In 2008, Techno Champs was renamed “Ferme de recherche en productions végétales” and moved a few kilometres to a “71-hectare plot of land on route 137, in Saint-Hyacinthe.”<sup>155</sup> The \$2.2 million investment let Sollio double its test plots and consolidate them in one location. The company continued to conduct other tests at eight agronomic stations in Quebec and Ontario, using more than 80 regional farms for the final evaluation of seeds, inputs and crop farming practices.” Targeting field crop farmers, Sollio kept up the momentum, producing “around 15 new hybrids each year. Constant innovation is necessary because hybrid seed performance declines after a few years.” To this day, research at the farm continues to make progress using biotechnology—for example, “by introducing genes that protect against the main plant pests (including corn borer and rootworm) and provide increased herbicide resistance to increase productivity.”



The Saint-Hyacinthe research and development centre, established in 1987.





## The Co-op Laboratory

The final addition to Sollio's research arsenal was a testing lab, to which a section called Agridirect was later added. This section would serve the additional clients gained when Sollio acquired labs from the Ministère de l'Agriculture, de l'alimentation et des pêcheries du Québec (MAPAQ) in Longueuil. When MAPAQ withdrew from the chemical testing service in 1997 and the three laboratories in Rock Forest, Alma and Rimouski, Sollio took the opportunity to acquire the labs through its subsidiary Agridirect. "Due to several factors—the increased prevalence of satellite soil geo-positioning analyses, more precise monitoring of feed rations, new legislation adopted in late 1997 requiring producers to have agri-environmental fertilization programs—the laboratory ramped up its activities. Testing was now extended to manure and water quality. The Longueuil laboratory obtained its ISO certification in 2001. At the time, it employed about 50 people during the summer, its busiest season."

## Soy

Soy had been gaining in popularity for a variety of food applications, including animal feed and tofu production. It began attracting increased interest, and the area devoted to its production “increased eightfold from 1990 to 2000.” Against this backdrop, Sollio got to work marketing the product, especially to the Asian market, mainly Japan. Once again, the company tapped into the knowledge of its network, working “in collaboration with the Société coopérative agricole du sud de Montréal, which owned soy packaging and container packing facilities in Napierville.”

The grain and mill supply sector was prolific in the late 2000s. In 2008, Sollio reached the symbolic milestone of one million tonnes of grain handled in a single year. “Sales increased [...] from \$192.7 million in 2007 to \$768.3 million in 2013.” Then, starting in 2007, Sollio gained access to a transshipment centre via JEFO Logistique Inc. in Saint-Hyacinthe. “Completed in October 2007, the warehouse had a capacity of 12,000 tonnes and was used for unloading trains, either indoors during bad weather or outdoors on a stretch of track about a kilometre long.”<sup>156</sup> Sollio partnered with the cooperative Comax for the project.

On the maritime transport front, Sollio partnered for a few years with GLS (Les Grains du lac Supérieur), a Trois-Rivières company. Together they ensured the riverway transportation of grains “to numerous Chaudière-Appalaches hog barns.” The partnership came to an end when GLS filed for bankruptcy in 2014,<sup>157</sup> “but the idea of a grain port terminal in the Port of Quebec did not lose steam. The Sillery distribution centre was also used to store local harvests.” Meanwhile, in Montreal, Sollio joined forces with other partners, including the Port of Montreal at CanEst Transit Inc., which provided “a massive terminal for containerizing agricultural products and handling grain and by-products in bulk or bags.”

In the early 2000s, Sollio increased its warehouse capacity at its hardware and building materials distribution centre in Trois-Rivières. The site’s product variety was impressive, with a “range of farm and sugarbush accessories, pet food, paint and decorating supplies, plumbing and electrical equipment, tools for contractors and home renovators, horticultural products, etc.” In 2002, with a team of 170 employees, the distribution centre served a network of “160 co-op hardware stores

and independent renovation centres in Quebec, New Brunswick and Eastern Ontario.” In addition to product sales, support services were offered to retailers—“store design, flyer and catalogue preparation and distribution, IT support, management assistance, staff training activities.” Volume savings were achieved through partnerships with “Canadian and North American groups such as Mutual Hardware, Reliance Buying Group, Octo Purchasing Group and IPCO.” Sales continued to climb: “From 1999 to 2003, the hardware and farm machinery sector grew by 35%.”

### **QUINCAILLERIE CO-OP BECOMES UNIMAT**

In 2003, Quincaillerie Co-op underwent a major rebrand, becoming Unimat.

Unimat started out as a separate banner from Quincaillerie Co-op. Its goal was to recruit new independent dealers to ensure growth and success for the retail division, which had been established in 1977. New clients recruited under this banner would then be added to the pool of cooperatives served by the Trois-Rivières warehouse.

To avoid any confusion among consumers—who associated the Quincaillerie Co-op brand with members-only cooperatives—the name was changed to Unimat. The strategy worked: the new brand began bringing in customers, so much so that cooperatives quickly began asking to come on board.

By opting for the Unimat brand, cooperatives opened themselves up to the larger public, giving them access to a wider market and positioning them ideally for growth.



## BMR

The concept of BMR was the brainchild of six businessmen who met in Laval in 1967. Originally called Union Six, the organization was renamed BMR the following year, taking the first letter of three of its founders' last names.

In the 1970s, BMR saw that the renovation industry was booming and turned towards retail sales in response. Ten years later, it began developing private labels. The year 1997 marked the launch of BMR home renovation centres and the transition into a full hardware store offering 16,000 different products.

When the group was acquired by La Fédérée in 2015, the addition of Unimat dealers to the BMR network brought its total number of affiliated stores up to 350. In 2017, BMR Group celebrated its 50th anniversary!<sup>158</sup>

BMR Matco Sainte-Catherine







[www.bmr.co](http://www.bmr.co)

**BMR**

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GROUPE **BMR**

## Acquisition of BMR Group

Sollio began acquiring BMR in 2013 and completed the process in 2015. The transaction meant that the group was now owned by a single shareholder—Sollio. By this time Sollio was a titan of the Quebec agri-food industry and already held the Unimat banner, which encompassed more than 150 hardware stores across Quebec. In 2015, these hardware stores joined the 187 home renovation centres flying the BMR banner to form a group of 350 dealers, dubbed BMR Group, which owned the brands Agrizone, BMR, Potvin & Bouchard and Unimat.

Growing from 187 dealers to 350 in just a few months required a concerted effort. The entire supply chain was redesigned, and the company worked very hard to satisfy its huge network of dealers.

In 2016, the focus was on consolidation and capacity-building. Warehouses were implementing the strategy developed and meeting their service targets. Less than a year after the acquisition, the sizeable challenge of integrating the two groups was overcome, and BMR Group's quality of service was well above market standards. This union of two Quebec flagships allowed all entities involved to continue hiring local talent and providing members and consumers alike with access to competitively priced products, right in their own communities.

BMR PRO Pierre Naud  
Trois-Rivières



For Sollio, purchasing BMR Group was a way to ensure the sustainability of its hardware division, making it a strategic alliance. “This acquisition was a solution to ensure the long-term presence of our retail sector.” “Keeping our regional economies healthy was one of La Coop fédérée’s missions, and acquiring BMR gave us the tools to do just that!” The purchase made Sollio the second largest player on the market and extended its geographic reach to nearly every corner of Quebec.

### **Agricultural machinery**

This department shared premises with the Trois-Rivières distribution centre. But Sollio’s involvement in the area was called into question, particularly after “the loss of distribution rights to the Fiatagri brand.” Indeed, the machinery department was facing a decline, with sales “falling from 15% to about 7% from 2000 to 2010. This was the result of several factors: a decrease in the number of farmers, equipment sharing within agricultural machinery cooperatives, the adoption of new methods (which reduced tillage).” Nevertheless, the parts department remained fairly large, with an inventory of 10,000 items and a team of about 15 employees. “In total, the Trois-Rivières distribution centre served 190 farm and forestry machinery sales outlets and 200 parts outlets. It is worth noting that 80% of business was done outside the cooperative network.”<sup>159</sup>

### **Meetings of minds in the Quebec agri-food industry**

Hoping to translate into tangible actions the directions identified at the 1998 summit, stakeholders created a follow-up secretariat headed by Mario Dumais, who left his position as a Sollio manager to take on this new role. Action plans were officially adopted at the decision makers’ meeting held one year later, in March 1999. Quebec’s targets were ambitious: “double food exports, increase the domestic market share of Quebec products by 10%, invest \$7.5 billion in farms and in the processing sector, and create 15,000 jobs.” The stakeholders noted with satisfaction that their investment and export targets were on track to succeed; however, this was not true of other objectives. This led them to update their plan and set new objectives.

## **THE QUEBEC AGRICULTURE AND AGRI-FOOD SUMMIT**

In March 1998, a summit for Quebec agriculture and agri-food stakeholders was held in Saint-Hyacinthe. Presided over by Premier Lucien Bouchard, it brought together the major players in the fields of agriculture (UPAs and specialty federations), agri-food (processing and distribution, including Sollio) and socioeconomics. Presentations covered such topics as trade liberalization, the Danish pork industry and the evolution of the UK milk marketing system.<sup>160</sup>

“The consensus was that the industry raised interesting growth prospects for regional development and job creation. To succeed in this respect, stakeholders needed to up exports, particularly in pork, and increase the domestic market share of Quebec farmers and businesses.”



Sollio and its affiliated cooperatives soon achieved enviable results: “exports increased from \$250 million to \$620 million (representing 50% of overall growth in the industry), 3,500 jobs were created (an increase of 25%) and investments doubled in three years to reach \$60 million.” Paul Massicotte, then company president, reminded participants that, beyond achieving the targeted results, they also needed to “chart a course for sustainable development.” In 2006, Jean Charest’s Liberal government introduced a new large-scale endeavour: the Commission sur l’avenir de l’agriculture et de l’agroalimentaire québécois (CAAAQ).

### **COMMISSION SUR L’AVENIR DE L’AGRICULTURE ET DE L’AGROALIMENTAIRE QUÉBÉCOIS (2006–2008)**

In May 2006, a commission was formed to protect the future of agriculture and agri-food in Quebec. It was charged with four main tasks:

1. Draw up a status report on the issues facing Quebec’s agriculture and agri-food industry.
2. Review the effectiveness of existing public interventions.
3. Diagnose the situation.
4. Issue recommendations, taking into account the challenges of competition, farm income, societal expectations and regional development.

Presided over by sociologist Jean Pronovost, the CAAAQ received some 770 briefs and, in January 2008, published a 274-page report. The compact yet rich document is a must-read for an understanding of the agri-food industry’s standing and perspectives.<sup>161</sup> The report covers numerous topics, including marketing, processing, distribution, consumer expectations, the environment, protection of agricultural land and governance—a sensitive subject, as it deals with the UPA monopoly. Other reports will be tabled in the future.

The trade liberalization movement that had begun in the 1980s had led some countries to encourage the concentration of their agri-food production into only a few areas. However, this specialization also made them vulnerable by creating dependence on imports.

The debate around food thus took another turn with the focus shifting to the importance of a country's food sovereignty to avoid dependence—not only on supply from other countries but also on global prices. It was also important to be able to meet domestic consumers' preferences and demands without depending on foreign trade. Against this backdrop, Quebec launched its own food sovereignty policy in May 2013. The policy covered four areas:<sup>162</sup>

1. "QUEBEC FOOD AND CULTURAL IDENTITY
2. DYNAMIC LAND USE
3. DEVELOPMENT OF THE INDUSTRY'S FULL ECONOMIC POTENTIAL
4. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT."

Like many other stakeholders in the agri-food Quebec industry, Sollio supported this initiative.

## **Dialogue between cooperatives**

In 2003, Sollio made the decision to join the Société de coopération pour le développement international (SOCODEVI), wishing to share its knowledge and know-how with similar organizations in low-income countries. Sollio representatives regularly serve on the SOCODEVI Board of Directors and that of its foundation, in addition to taking part in on-the-ground projects. On December 18, 2009, the UN General Assembly declared 2012 the International Year of Cooperatives, giving coops unprecedented global visibility.





## **SOLLIO AND SOCODEVI**

Founded in 1985, SOCODEVI brings together the vast majority of Quebec mutual and cooperative groups, with the exception of Mouvement Desjardins, which has its own similar NGO (DID). SOCODEVI's purpose is to support projects in low-income countries. Since its inception, the organization has been involved in more than 400 initiatives in a wide variety of sectors, and its membership now covers more than 40 countries. Sollio has been a member since 2003, and as of March 2022,<sup>163</sup> it and its members Agrilait, Comax and Nutrinor will have given their support 207 times. Sollio has been particularly active in 20 countries. Along with its members, Sollio has also welcomed several delegations from other countries.

# 8

## **TOWARDS 100 YEARS OF SOLLIO** (2015–2022)

This period was marked by several major events, many of which would have a significant impact on the agri-food industry at large. To start, climate change emerged as a global issue calling upon us to radically change our relationship with the earth, including our use of energy.

Furthermore, relations between Canada and China have been deeply shaky since late 2018, including on the trade front. For geopolitical reasons, China closed its borders to Canadian imports, including pork, which directly impacted Olymel's and Sollio's bottom line.

Of course, there was also the COVID-19 pandemic, which hit the world in March 2020, tanking the global economy and causing massive supply chain issues and inventory shortages.

Another major disturbance came with the outbreak of Russia's war on Ukraine in February 2022. This severely upped tensions on economic channels with an almost universal boycott or taxation of Russian imports on one side and severe disruptions to Ukrainian production capacities on the other, particularly wheat. Sollio Agriculture was directly affected in terms of organic and inorganic fertilizers.

In 2020, La Coop fédérée changed its name to Sollio Cooperative Group, which was easier to use in French and English. This was deemed necessary, in light of the organization's Canada-wide presence. The new name calls to mind soil, sun and solidarity.

The increased use of technology that had begun in the decades prior was further ramped up. At Sollio, new advances were used in farm management, soil use optimization and other smart applications; at BMR, they were put to work in online ordering. Going forward, next steps are sure to be taken in the realm of artificial intelligence.

## **AGRICULTURE TODAY AND TOMORROW**

In June 2018, census data showed that there were “41,406 Quebecers in the farming profession, operating 28,194 farm enterprises, most of them family businesses. The majority of farmers were also business owners, and the average farm was 110 hectares in size. Deeply rooted in Quebec, these farms provide employment to 56,000 people. Each year, they invest \$547 million in Quebec's regional economies.”<sup>164</sup> The year before that, farming produced \$8.5 billion in revenues, making it the largest primary-sector industry in Quebec. Production was mainly concentrated in the animal sector, covering cow's milk, poultry, veal, pork and eggs. Organic agriculture was continuing to climb in popularity. In five years, from 2015 to 2020, the area of farmland dedicated to organic agriculture increased from 49,000 hectares to 106,000 hectares, a trend that shows no sign of slowing down.<sup>165</sup>

At the Canadian level, a series of short studies on the agriculture of tomorrow was published, finding “34% of consumers are more concerned about food safety since the start of the pandemic”<sup>166</sup> and emphasizing “the need for local, adaptable food chains” and “sustainable farming practices.” Furthermore, while acknowledging that “the agribusiness industry in Canada faces challenges posed by increasing labour shortages, competition from foreign players, rising land costs, and shifting weather patterns,” the researchers assert that agriculture must be transformed into a high-tech industry and be open to innovations in “AgTech”—a contraction of the words agriculture and technology.

## Sollio's expansion

Through numerous acquisitions and new business partnerships, Sollio established itself on a Canada-wide scale as the largest cooperative organization in the agri-food industry, with Sollio Agriculture and Olymel as its star divisions. Its facilities and those of its partners had spread to every province east of British Columbia and represented a wide variety of businesses—retailers, feed mills, grain elevators, terminals, poultry farms and hatcheries, distribution centres, administrative offices, research stations.

The organization supported its growth with sustained positive financial results, including remarkable performance in 2020 with a net surplus of more than \$140 million, but the impact of the pandemic and the closure of China's borders caused a slight loss for the year 2021. Another notable move came in 2016, when Sollio launched a massive restructuring project by the name of Vision 2020, later updated to Vision Plus.

### **VISION 2020 AND VISION PLUS: BRINGING THE BUSINESS MODEL INTO THE NEW DECADE**

"Vision Plus was a massive restructuring project aiming to consolidate the group's farming cooperatives into the Sollio Agriculture division and seek out new business partnerships. Sollio officials wanted to update the company's business model to better meet the needs of producers and ensure longevity for the network in an environment of strong market consolidation. The project achieved tangible results. Cooperatives' sales and equity grew steadily for several years. The financial strength of our cooperatives improved year after year. [...] Clearly, the impact of agricultural cooperative consolidation was beginning to be seen, thanks in part to the greater critical mass they generated. [...] The other aspect of Vision Plus—the creation of new partnerships with regional farm businesses—was also well underway. For examples of success in this regard, one need only look to Sollio's partnerships with Vivaco, Avantis Uniag, Agjiska and Unoria."



## GHISLAIN GERVAIS

THE YOUNGEST PRESIDENT  
IN THE HISTORY OF SOLLIO

After graduating from the Institut de technologie agroalimentaire, Ghislain Gervais began his career as a poultry and field crop farmer in Saint-Guillaume. He joined the Agrilait cooperative Board of Directors in 2000 and served as its chair from 2001 to 2015. He was also First Vice-President of Sollio's board from 2014 to 2016. At the age of 45, he "became the youngest president in the company's history."

Once in that position, he hit the ground running, immediately accepting a seat on the CMC Board of Directors. As President of Sollio, he was quick to foster dialogue between consumers and the agri-food industry, guided by two major goals: to listen, and to be heard.

He also writes a column for the *Coopérateur*, where he offers his insights into the major issues facing the organization—and since 2020, he has had much to write about!

## THE GROWING PRESENCE OF WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE

Though they have been long overlooked, women have always lived and worked on farms. It was not until the advent of automation and industrialization that the farming profession became synonymous with men's work, coupled with legislation that did not allow women to own a business or earn a salary. Thus, women have long been hidden in the shadow of agricultural landowners.

Women in agriculture have, however, had two organizations since the early 20th century. The Cercle des fermières was founded in 1915 and has since flourished with the support of the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Union catholique des fermières was created in 1944 as a branch of the Union catholique des cultivateurs.

In 1964, the *Act respecting the legal capacity of married women* recognized the full legal capacity of women in terms of their civil rights in matters of marriage and business. As a result, women farmers were able to expand and diversify their roles and take up a more distinct position in farm operations, which were gradually becoming family businesses.

However, until the 1970s, women were largely relegated to the domestic sphere, and although women did take on their share of farm work, they were seldom recognized for it. The cooperative movement was no exception. With all-men member organizations, boards of directors and advisors, the entire movement seemed to be made by and for men. This was even reflected in La Coopérative fédérée's ads, which referred to the agri-advisors of the day exclusively as "Mister Co-op!"

Slowly but surely, people's minds were opened to the fact that women in farming faced many challenges. By the 1980s, the demands made by women picked up speed. Paul-É. St-Pierre, then president of La Coopérative fédérée, stated in 1982 that the organization did not simply want to pay lip service to women in farming. He was initiating "a process that would make women a much more integral part of our movement." As history shows, he was correct.

In 1987, Renelle Valade made history as the first woman elected to the board of directors of a regional dairy cooperative, Agrinove. In February of that year, Diane Clément was elected to the Agrodor Board and in January 1988, Carmelle Faucher became the first woman farmer to be featured on the cover of *Le Coopérateur agricole*!

In the late 1990s, Francine Ferland was elected to the Board of La Coopérative fédérée. No woman before her had managed to break through that glass ceiling, as one delegate noted at the 1997 AGM. In 1998, a new seat was created specifically for women representatives, and Ferland was elected to the position by vote among all the women delegates. The following year, the organization developed its first action plan for the equitable representation of women in network governance. This plan has been updated each year since to reflect new developments. At the time of this book's writing, the proportion of women serving on boards of directors in the network is still only 7.5%.

In the last 20 years, the feminization of farming has gained momentum, such that roughly 45% of farm start-ups are now women-led, and women in farming have an overall higher level of education than their male counterparts. Clearly, women are just beginning to scratch the surface of their potential in the agricultural industry.

## SOME FEMALE PIONEERS OF THE NETWORK



**FRANCINE  
FERLAND**

First woman elected  
to the Board of  
Directors of Sollio  
Groupe Coopératif



**SOPHIE  
BÉDARD**

First woman member  
of the executive  
committee



## **MURIEL DUBOIS**

First woman to ever hold the position of First Vice President of the Board of Directors of Quebec's largest agrifood enterprise



## **FRANÇOISE MONGRAIN**

First woman elected to a territorial post

► Ferme Brassard, finalist for the New Farm Enterprise and Farm Succession Award, 2020 edition.

Ferme Couturier et frères Inc., 2020–2021 winner in the New Farm Enterprise category.

Ferme Wilvoc Holsteins, finalist for the New Farm Enterprise and Farm Succession Award, 2021–2022 edition.







## **BMR INDEPENDENT DEALERS**

Sollio member organizations also include corporations, grouped into sections, as well as several consumer cooperatives. These entities' voting rights vary depending on their number of members and their sales with Sollio Cooperative Group. This category includes BMR independent dealers, who officially became a part of the network in 2019. As non-cooperative dealers, they have procurement contracts with Sollio Cooperative Group and operating and licensing contracts with BMR Group Inc. that allow them to become members of the BMR independent dealer section of Sollio Cooperative Group. In 2022, there were 82 BMR independent dealers in the network.

## Administration

During this period, Sollio passed the major milestone of 15,000 employees, making it a significant employer not only in Quebec but also Canada-wide. Yet its workforce changed dramatically with the COVID-19 pandemic that began in March 2020, due to the implementation of new work practices, the exacerbation of labour shortages and the costs of COVID-19 outbreaks in plants leading to the inevitable absence of affected employees. In the interest of employee well-being and in response to new market trends, Sollio instituted a new remote-work policy based on a hybrid work model. One effect of the pandemic was the accelerated adoption of technological tools that allowed employees to stay connected remotely and enjoy a better work-life balance.

## Commercial operations

The agri-business division, which had been called Sollio Agriculture since 2019, began seeing strong growth outside Quebec. This had begun with the purchase of Agronomy and Agrico Canada Ltd., two organizations located in Western Canada and Ontario, respectively. Later, an opportunity presented itself in the Maritimes with La Coop Atlantique. Founded in 1927, the cooperative had been active in the Maritime provinces in a variety of sectors, including farm supply, food distribution and housing. In 2014,<sup>167</sup> its financial situation became unsustainable, forcing it to sell off its assets. The food distribution division was bought by Sobeys, and Sollio purchased the agricultural division, which consisted of “mills in Moncton, Truro and New Minas, as well as the Farm Supply and Grain Merchandising Division. The assets were then grouped into a subsidiary, Atlantic Farm Services, headquartered in Moncton.”<sup>168</sup> This decision made it possible to maintain the necessary resources for the farm cooperative model to survive in Eastern Canada.

In acquiring these assets, Sollio also took ownership of Western Brokerage, a Winnipeg-based company. This carved out a space for the agri-business division in the grain and animal-feed ingredient merchandising market in the Prairies. Meanwhile, the Ontario subsidiary Agrico purchased two retailers specializing in crop production, both located in southern Saskatchewan.

Sollio took a big step in its westward expansion in 2018, with the purchase of Standard Nutrition Canada.<sup>169</sup> It was the biggest transaction in the history of the division, with the assets acquired spanning stores and warehouses in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, in addition to a mill and grain centre in Winnipeg and a premix and minerals plant.

In 2018, another subsidiary, Agromart, acquired 13 grain and crop production input establishments from Cargill, a multinational. A partnership was struck up with Tilbury's Maizex Seeds, making Sollio the largest Canadian-owned seed business in corn and soy. Sollio also signed agreements with W-S Feed & Supplies Ltd., a company operating in the animal feed sector.

Back in Quebec, a maritime grain and cereal export terminal was established in the Anse au Foulon sector of the Port of Quebec. Sollio was also involved in a joint venture, CanEst Transit Inc., which operated a terminal for cleaning and containerizing agricultural products in the Port of Montreal. In 2019, Sollio Agriculture built a grain elevator in Truro, Nova Scotia and, in partnership with QSL, a grain export terminal in Oshawa, Ontario targeting the European, Central American and the Caribbean markets.

Sollio now possessed strategic infrastructure on the Great Lakes and the St Lawrence River that would allow it to develop exports. The domestic market, however, remained by far its most important market for grain merchandising in the cooperative network (animal feed, ethanol, milling). Across Canada, its network of feed mills and premix and minerals plants spanned from Nova Scotia to Alberta. In Quebec, Sollio Agriculture's operations were supported by the Saint-Romuald complex, which "included the MPX feed premix and minerals plant and the distribution centre that was built in 2013." It also had two other mills in Saint-Pie-de-Bagot and L'Ange-Gardien, having acquired the assets of F. Ménard's pork division.

In corn seed, competition was stiff—it was "a market dominated by multinationals."<sup>170</sup> However, "a partnership between Elite and Maizex led to a new joint venture that became a frontrunner in corn seed." Both companies' crop breeding teams were mobilized, resulting in major genomic advances. "In 2019, scientists began sequencing the DNA of some 700 of the best Elite seed varieties selected over the past 20 years to obtain their genetic code."<sup>171</sup>

Pesticides were also at the forefront of discussions, reflecting public concern about their impact on human health. “Following a public consultation in summer 2017 [...], new regulations were implemented in 2018 banning the use of atrazine, chlorpyrifos and three neonicotinoids unless prescribed by an agronomist.<sup>172</sup> At Sollio, nicotinoid-free versions of nearly all the hybrid corn seeds in the Elite line had already been available since 2014.”<sup>173</sup>

## **AGROCENTRES**

The year 2015 marked the 25th anniversary of Agrocentres, a network of six retail locations across Quebec offering crop production inputs (seeds, fertilizers, crop protection products). Agrocentres “provide La Coop fédérée with a guaranteed portion of the clientele of field crop and vegetable producers who are not members of a cooperative. The introduction of the Agrocentres in 1990 helped La Coop fédérée reach a high enough sales volume to justify investing in its distribution centres in Côte-Sainte-Catherine and Sillery.

Though at first specializing in fertilizer sales, the Agrocentres later expanded their product and service offering to better meet the needs of crop production farmers.

Family-owned and operated, they have more than 160 employees and, like the regional cooperatives, are integral parts of their respective communities.

Agrocentres are also innovators. For example, in 2007 Fertibec began selling vegetable seeds. In 2010, it launched the brand ‘Seminova’ for the varieties of onions, carrots, lettuce, crucifers, sweet corn, etc., that it offers to vegetable producers. The seeds are sourced from about thirty different suppliers worldwide and grown in test plots where they are evaluated and either adopted or rejected. The Saint-Hyacinthe Agrocentre had the distinction of opening the first bulk soybean seed processing centre in Quebec [...] in 2013.”<sup>174</sup>

## The digital shift in agricultural production

Society was going digital, and the agri-food industry was no exception, with changes taking place in many different areas.

“Dairy farm robotization remains the most dramatic advance in automation. According to 2016 census data, more than 400 Quebec dairy farms had used this technology, representing 8% of the total.”<sup>175</sup>

Another application now found on all online tools is GPS. The benefits of this breakthrough are undeniable. “In the 2016 census, there were nearly 4,700—or one in six— Quebec farms using it in all sectors combined.<sup>176</sup> At that time, 37% of field crop (grain and oilseed) producers were using GPS. In vegetable and dairy, it was 23%. With GPS, farmers saved on mineral fertilizer, pesticides and fuel by applying ‘the right amount, in the right place, at the right time.’

Another new technology made available to Sollio members was satellite imaging. “Launched in summer 2011, the first satellite imaging campaign covered the St Lawrence Plains.”<sup>177</sup> “It was extended to Rivière-du-Loup and Saguenay–Lac-Saint-Jean the following year and then to the entire province in 2013.”<sup>178</sup> “Satellite images show crop density levels in July and August. After harvest, more data becomes available: relative yield maps, economic maps that pair profitability data with different yield zones, and management zone maps that can be used to plan variable rate seeding and analyze levelling, drainage and other soil constraints.”<sup>179</sup>

In 2018, a digital platform called AgConnexion was launched, combining a variety of precision agriculture tools. AgConnexion included “a SmartFarm module with a range of features [...] like the ability to store information from farm equipment sensors or connected objects [...]. The platform also includes a ‘portal’, where farmers can contact their agri-advisors, retailers and cooperatives or make transactions. In its first year of availability, the platform was used by over 6,700 farms.<sup>180</sup> In terms of immediate impact, AgConnexion helped reduce customer follow-up time by 80% and increased farm profitability by up to 10% in some segments.”<sup>181</sup> Since its launch, the regularly updated platform has become a more and more integral part of farmers’ daily work.

Forme libre - 333  
Alain Rousard-Intelli > Formation

Zone	
ZONE	ZONE
1	2,981 HA
2	7,145 HA
3	3,918 HA

Semis ATV	
ZONE	SEMIS ATV
1	75000
2	80000
3	85000



Emplacements

Recherche...

Culture Variété Ferme

Emplacements

- 001 | 2021 Maïs grain  
Maïs grain  
2021 23,73 hectares
- 009 | 2021 Corn, Grain  
Maïs grain  
2021 16,7 hectares
- 013 | 2021 Corn, Grain  
Maïs grain  
2021 28,67 hectares
- 024 | 2021 Soybean  
Maïs grain  
2021 11,9 hectares
- 025 | 2021 Corn, Grain  
Maïs grain  
2021 1,81 hectares
- 028 | 2021 Corn, Grain  
Maïs grain  
2021 1,4 hectares
- 029 | 2021 Corn, Grain  
Maïs grain  
2021 1,15 hectares
- 030 | 2021 Corn, Grain  
Maïs grain  
2021 7,73 hectares



## **BMR Group**

After a minority investment in 2014, Sollio became the sole proprietor of BMR Group in 2015, making it the largest fully Quebec-owned hardware store chain. The acquisition led to a consolidation of Sollio's activities. BMR Group facilities would now supply its store network, which had several warehouses throughout the province. This meant closing the Trois-Rivières distribution centre and, in 2018, the nearby agricultural machinery and spare parts distribution department.

In addition to the traditional BMR banner, the group was operating under two other names. BMR Pro offered a wide selection of building materials catering to contractors, while Agrizone specifically targeted farmers with product categories like farm building and animal enclosure supplies, collars and halters, and animal feeders and waterers.

In 2019, BMR purchased minority interest in CDL Maple Sugaring Equipment—another Quebec company—allowing it to offer a better selection of maple sugaring products. Later that year, it also acquired stake in Lefebvre & Benoit via an agreement. The partnership was mutually beneficial, allowing both parties to contribute their complementary areas of expertise to improve their respective product offerings and strengthen their position in the hardware and building materials sector.

The pandemic brought about a huge boom in online shopping, which fortunately coincided with the launch of BMR's omnichannel strategy allowing customers to have their online orders delivered to their homes or pick them up in the store.

## **Energies SonGo: a new business model**

In 2015, Sonic partnered with Filgo Group, a Sainte-Marie-de-Beauce company, in a joint venture to create Energies SonGo Inc. The new entity would come to distribute 1.6 billion litres of fuel per year, with 300 gas stations, 775 employees, 24 office spaces, 166 petroleum product distributors and delivery agents and \$1.5 billion in sales. This business volume leaves Energies SonGo well placed to meet the challenges of the energy transition, i.e., "lower sales volumes of fossil fuel products and higher environmental management and operating costs."



## **Olymel**

Olymel became the largest pork producer in Canada, shipping to over 60 countries. Like other Sollio sectors, Olymel grew substantially from 2014 to 2021, seeing its business volume increase from \$2.8 billion to \$4.2 billion. This success was down to two main factors: high demand for fresh pork products and business acquisitions.

In Eastern Canada, Olymel introduced a new production concept with five cooperative hog farrowing complexes. Located in Fugèreville, in the Témiscamingue region, the complexes began operating under the name Fermes boréales in 2015 and included a first batch of five cooperative farrowing areas. “Each farrowing area was designed to house 2,360 sows and 10 boars, with the goal of delivering roughly 65,000 piglets to farmers. [...] In addition to La Coop Fédérée and its meat division, Olymel, investors for the project included Comax, Covilac and Unicoop—three cooperatives that were very active in pork production—and producers Denis Richard and Sophie Bédard. Other hog producers were then invited to buy stock in the group farrowing facility rather than investing in their own, in order to bring it up to the animal welfare standards that will come into effect in 2024.” Borrowed from Europe, this approach enabled a higher production volume than the dominant model in Quebec, in which farmers raised 200 to 300 sows at a time in farrow-to-finish operations.

## **Sogeporc**

Sollio continued its research activities via AlphaGene, a subsidiary that changed its name to Sogeporc in 2017. Its goal: “to select the best boars from the Duroc breed and the best performing hybrid sows.” Sollio also worked on applied genomics projects. Far from remaining Quebec-based, its operations were extended into Ontario and Western Canada.

Western Canadian production increased by way of the subsidiary OlySky. From an initial volume of 42,000 sows in 2013, it reached 60,000 sows after acquiring two Alberta producers. With the additional sow volumes in Quebec and Alberta, Sollio had an annual herd of 134,000 sows in 2020. Across Canada, “Olymel outranked

Maple Leaf Agri-Farms and the Manitoban company HyLife in business volume, reaching the top five in 2020.”<sup>182</sup>

Investments in the two main Olymel plants in Quebec were made to diversify their production. In Vallée-Jonction, development focused on the needs of Japanese consumers. As such, “a specialized team was tasked with cutting fresh chilled pork for the Japanese market.”<sup>183</sup> The product was highly sought after by Japanese consumers for use in the dish *tonkatsu*, slices of pork loin or tenderloin fried in a crispy batter and served over a bowl of rice and vegetables.” Meanwhile, slaughter and cutting operations enabled the ATrahan plant in Yamachiche to specialize in niche products like Nagano pork, also for the Japanese market. At the Saint-Esprit plant, \$25 million was invested for “the manufacturing of value-added products, such as fresh chilled pork.”<sup>184</sup> The investment created 200 new jobs.

Olymel was also busy actively developing its production capacities by purchasing the assets of various companies, including producer and processor F. Ménard Inc. and Trois-Rivières company La Fernandière, which specialized in fresh sausage production. In 2018, Olymel acquired the assets of Aliments Triomphe from the Latifi family. The acquisition included three production facilities in Laval, Blainville and Quebec City, and two distribution centres in Blainville and Saint-Léonard. In one fell swoop, Olymel had taken ownership of Tour Eiffel, Chef Georges and La Belle Bretagne (ham and pâté) and Bilopage (cretons and head cheese), all well-known brands that had been purchased by Aliments Triomphe in 2012.

In the poultry sector, Olymel had already risen to the top among Canadian producers for slaughter volumes through partnerships with Volaille Giannone and Sunnymel and the purchase of several guaranteed supply volumes. In subsequent years, it consolidated this position. In 2017, the organization invested \$30 million in improving production at its secondary processing plant in Brampton, Ontario. In June 2018, Olymel bought Pinty’s Delicious Foods Inc., an Ontarian business with three plants and 360 employees. Pinty’s specialized in poultry slaughter and processing for cooked products. Then in 2020, Olymel moved forward with a \$31.5 million project to expand the Saint-Damase slaughter and cutting plant.

In just five years—2015 to 2020—Olymel truly made its mark on the Canadian market, with investments of over \$1.5 billion and growth from 10,000 to over 15,000 employees. But despite the organization’s past experience dealing with coronaviruses and avian flus, its workforce was no exception to the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020.

## **OLYMEL AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

“Like most large slaughter and meat processing outfits in North America, Olymel was hit hard by COVID-19. Most of its plants had their operations disrupted by outbreaks, forcing work interruptions or slow-downs for varying periods of time. At the outset of the pandemic, the first Olymel plant to be affected was the Yamachiche hog slaughter and cutting plant, where about 100 of the approximately 1,000 employees were infected with the virus in the spring of 2020.

Faced with the gravity of the situation and the economic and social impact of this global health crisis, Olymel’s leadership took steps to support plant workers in their efforts to maintain the food supply chain for the benefit of the public. A temporary premium of two dollars per hour was paid to all hourly wage workers involved in pork production, slaughtering, primary and secondary processing, transportation, maintenance and warehousing in the pork and poultry sectors.

The crisis also affected the delivery of animals to slaughterhouses. Lack of personnel led to a backlog of hogs at producers. In late May 2020, more than 800 employees at the Yamachiche, Saint-Esprit and L’Ange-Gardien slaughterhouses agreed to work overtime shifts in order to reduce the number of hogs on hold and thus avoid the need for culling. Tens of thousands of hogs from Ontario were sent to the Red Deer plant, and a total of 200,000 were diverted from Olymel slaughterhouses to other Canadian and US facilities in 2020.

The second wave of the pandemic was no less a blow to Olymel employees. In fall 2020, three slaughterhouses were affected by outbreaks, and the company mourned the death of an employee at the Vallée-Jonction plant. In January 2021, the Red Deer plant was devastated. With 20% of its 1,850 employees testing positive, Olymel management suspended operations from February 16 until early March. The plant saw more than 500 people infected, and three people died of the illness.”<sup>185</sup>

In addition to slow-downs due to the pandemic, other factors took a heavy toll on Olymel's chilled pork operations and profitability in 2021, as well as on Sollio Cooperative Group as a whole. The Canadian labour shortage hit Quebec particularly hard, and combined with the delayed arrival of foreign workers, the number of unfilled positions at Olymel reached 3000 in 2021. Profitability issues were exacerbated by a four-week strike at the Vallée-Jonction plant, causing a significant increase in the number of hogs on hold. China also closed its borders to some Olymel plants, removing an irreplaceable market for less popular cuts of pork. The decision reflected the existence of diplomatic tensions between Canada and China, on the one hand, and China's intention to become more self-sufficient, on the other.

## **Working with farm unions: supply management and Farm Income Stabilization Insurance**

Since 2014, Sollio and the UPA had been able to find common ground on the issue of supply management. However, this system was threatened on multiple occasions and even eroded by free trade agreements. Two agreements opened gaps in Canada's domestic market regulation system: the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (2016) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Both agreements led to increased competition in fine cheeses and other dairy products. The election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in 2016 also posed a significant threat to the Canadian supply management system. In response, Sollio hired PricewaterhouseCoopers to conduct a study on the implications of dismantling supply management in Canada for the egg and poultry sectors. The study concluded that, in Quebec alone, the change would pose an existential threat to some 7,000 family farms.

Sollio spared no expense to raise public awareness of the issue, launching a social media campaign around the message, "Let's protect our farming model—say 'yes' to supply management." But it was not enough to stop the system from slowly being eroded. With the signing of CUSMA in 2020, the Canadian market was further opened to imported products. "The focus of agricultural leaders will now be on ways to compensate producers for these losses." To that end, Sollio formed a united front with the UPA to maintain the Farm Income Stabilization Insurance program, administered (ASRA) by La Financière agricole du Québec.

## Increased public presence

In the years leading up to the publication of this book, Sollio began moving away from its usually neutral position to contribute to public debate on a variety of issues involving the farming profession.

One such controversial topic is the use of pesticides. In 2019, the organization weighed in on pesticide use as part of a parliamentary commission. In the statement, Sollio defended its members and farmers, who care deeply about keeping their families healthy, running their businesses successfully and providing consumers with healthy, high-quality food at affordable prices.

### TAKING ACTION

**Sollio's transition to more sustainable, responsible agriculture includes taking action on the following issues:**

- Protecting shorelines and sensitive areas: Many farmers still use these areas for farming, despite the proven negative effects.
- Promoting precision agriculture: Although technology is making it easier to collect data on the use of crop protection products, new agricultural practices are slow to take hold on the ground.
- Facilitating precision application: Farmers need expensive equipment for localized product application to apply only what is needed, when it is needed.
- Encouraging custom spraying: It is easier to perform audits when spraying is done by retailers, but 49% of Quebec farmers prefer to apply pesticides themselves.

Sollio has also been a partner in a series of initiatives aiming to educate the wider public about rural life. In 2015, Sollio and Agropur co-sponsored a television show on TVA titled *Arrive en campagne*, a deep dive into the agricultural world. In 2017, they teamed up again to produce a television campaign called *On récolte ce qu'on aime*.

## The next generation

Sollio financially supports a number of initiatives targeting succession in agriculture. In 2007, the Fonds coopératif d'aide à la Relève agricole (FCARA) was created to encourage the next generation of farmers to get involved in cooperative organizations, and it soon proved to be successful. "The eligibility criteria are kept fairly strict to ensure that the few dozen new applicants who qualify each year are the cream of the crop, and the program is administered by the cooperatives. For the full three years of the program, each participant must agree to take FCARA Board-approved training, including courses on cooperation, and to participate in certain associative activities."<sup>186</sup> The results speak for themselves: "In 2019, the La Coop Fédérée Board of Directors included three graduates."<sup>187</sup> Within the cooperative network, 24% of board members had honed their skills in the program, while also receiving FCARA's financial and professional support."<sup>188</sup>

"In 2018, the agri-business division of La Coop Fédérée became a national partner in supporting Canada's Outstanding Young Farmers Program (OYF), which recognizes the excellence of two young farmers selected from seven finalist farms under the provincial competition."<sup>189</sup> This effectively extended Sollio's support for the next generation beyond the borders of Quebec."

In 2022, the New Farm Enterprise and Farm Succession Award celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> year. The contest promotes the importance of interpersonal relationships in the successful transfer of farm businesses and the establishment of new ones. That same year also saw the early stages of bringing the contest to Ontario and the Maritimes.

## Social engagement

For Sollio, cooperation is more than a business model. It is also a way of life and a roadmap to the future. In upholding cooperative principles, Sollio has made itself an important vector of social change. Community and collective engagement is built into its cooperative DNA, taking the form of charitable donations, sponsorships and volunteer work.

In 2021, Sollio adopted a donation and sponsorship policy focusing on philanthropic issues that are particularly meaningful to the organization, such as promoting agriculture and agri-food, supporting the next generation of farmers and fostering cooperation. The policy aims to provide a framework for Sollio's actions in support of causes that align with its core values of honesty, equity, responsibility and solidarity.

Ferme A & L Desnoyers Inc.,  
2020–2021 winner in the  
Farm Succession category.





Ferme Dave Tourigny Inc.,  
finalist for the New Farm  
Enterprise and Farm  
Succession Award,  
2019–2020 edition.

Ferme Couturier et frères Inc.





Ferme Wilvoc Holsteins.

Ferme Valsé Inc.,  
2021–2022 winner in  
the New Farm Enterprise  
category.

Sollio was among the many organizations to take quick action in response to the public impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the area of food security. One example is De nous à vous, a campaign launched in June 2020 involving a massive chain of cooperation and solidarity between Sollio and 17 of its member cooperatives, including their farmers. In two years, the campaign raised \$1.5 million in cash and food donations to food security organizations, including Food Banks of Quebec and La Tablee des Chefs' Solidarity Kitchens. This sum is in addition to Olymel's contribution through its own fundraising campaigns, 2018's "Achat qui redonne" and "Ensemble, on redonne," which aimed to provide food to some of society's most vulnerable people.



Other Sollio Cooperative Group donations have gone to charities working to improve the well-being of farming families. For example, Sollio has supported Au cœur des familles agricoles since it was founded in 2003. Offering counselling and other services, the charity is unique and essential for its focus on agricultural workers, entrepreneurs and families. Since 2014, Sollio has also organized the Défi Sollio, a charity exercise challenge designed to improve the health and well-being of employees working at the organization, at its divisions and within its network. The challenge gives participants a chance to move their bodies and raise money for charity. After seven in-person editions and one virtual, held during the pandemic of COVID-19, it has raised over \$1 billion for various organizations.

Sollio is also involved in charitable work in other parts of the country “where it has employees and members. In 2020, it supported hospital foundations in Alberta and Saskatchewan, food banks in Manitoba and Ontario, and the Atlantic branch of Agriculture in the Classroom Canada.”

## 2022 and beyond

The outbreak of the Russian war on Ukraine in February 2022 had a direct impact on Sollio, especially its Sollio Agriculture division. The war came at a critical time, just weeks before planting season, compromising the supply of fertilizer, the vast majority of which was to be imported from Russia. When Canada imposed severe sanctions, including a 35% tax on Russian imports, Sollio had to redouble its efforts to receive the orders it had placed before the war and deliver the essential products to its members. The war also brought consequences for many countries around the world that import food from Ukraine, including wheat, which suddenly faced a risk of supply disruptions. Such disruptions could have a major impact on food security and social order in those countries.

Ferme Magolait enr., finalist  
for the New Farm Enterprise  
and Farm Succession Award,  
2021–2022 edition.

Ferme Belflamme Inc., 2019–2020  
winner in the Farm Succession  
category.

Ferme Magolait enr.

Ferme M & A Scoble, finalist  
for the New Farm Enterprise  
and Farm Succession Award,  
2020–2021 edition.

## Corporate responsibility at Sollio

Since 2015, a common framework has been used internationally to promote prosperity and protect the planet: the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In short, the list of 17 goals serves as a reminder that economic growth cannot be achieved in isolation from climate change response and environmental protection, as well as the fight against poverty, social protection and other global issues.<sup>190</sup>

The farm cooperative ecosystem and Sollio Cooperative Group have made various commitments to sustainable development. A highlight is the 2018 launch of Sollio's "first accountability process on its corporate performance in sustainable development." For Sollio, "growth is a long-term process, with the objective of ensuring the organization's sustainability for the benefit of its members, its employees and the regions where it operates, as well as the entire population that consumes food produced and processed in Canada."

Seeking to reduce its "environmental footprint, particularly in the areas of energy and water consumption at each of its divisions," Sollio has launched a number of initiatives. "It is also working on waste recovery and recycling." The organization decided to take concrete action and began by setting itself a clear mission built around 14 goals tied to six of the UN SDGs.

# Our **14** ambitions aligned with 6 UN Sustainable Development Goals



- 1** Promote sustainable agriculture among producers and other players in the agri-food sector
- 2** Be the benchmark in sustainable agriculture and agri-food in Canada



- 3** Promote physical and mental well-being in our operations, farms and communities
- 4** Implement measures for a zero-accident culture
- 5** Strengthen the employer brand through our forward-thinking working model



- 6** Minimize the impact of our operations on water resources
- 7** Actively support agricultural producers in their sustainable water management



- 8** Maximize regional benefits from investments and economic development projects
- 9** Promote our cooperative business model in how we conduct our economic activities



- 10** Reduce waste generated by our operations and stop them ending up in landfill
- 11** Eliminate food waste and recover organic residues generated by our operations
- 12** Promote healthy and responsible products to our customers

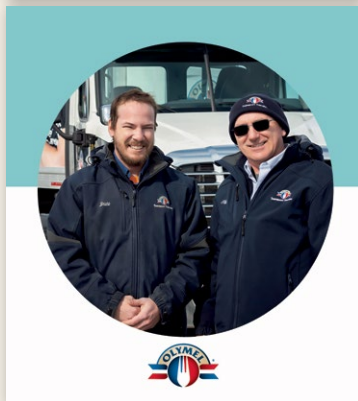
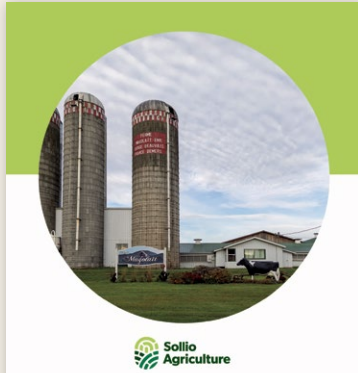


- 13** Set and achieve a GHG emissions reduction target for our operations
- 14** Promote climate change adaptation among agricultural producers

With the ongoing need for agricultural practices to align with the required environmental changes, several initiatives have arisen. For example, “as of 2019, Clean-farms has been working with its partners to implement a collection and recovery network for [...] agricultural plastics [i.e., wet hay bale wrap]. Sollio Cooperative Group participates actively in this initiative through its member cooperatives, BMR retailers, Agrocentres and mills.” There is also an ongoing pilot project that, in two years, has collected 135 tonnes of plastic in the Saint-Hyacinthe region alone.

Adaptation to climate change is also a top priority. Heat waves are growing longer and more frequent, and back-to-back tropical nights are increasingly common. Sollio is examining how to properly adapt barns to minimize heat impact on animal welfare, in this case, for the dairy cows.<sup>191</sup> The goal is to equip farmers with the best possible strategies and prepare the organization and, more broadly, the agricultural cooperation ecosystem, to face the major challenges of the years to come—in short, what Sollio has been doing since 1922.

**Sollio Cooperative Group**  
Cultivating, building and  
feeding local communities  
for 100 years.



## **SOLLIO IN 2022**

# **100 YEARS OF COOPERATION**

### **SOLLIO IS FARMING**

- \$2,772 billion in sales
- 1,271 employees
- 265 retailers
- 23 poultry farms and hatcheries
- 18 mills

### **SOLLIO IS HARDWARE**

- \$1,534 billion in sales
- 8,000 employees
- 16 corporate stores
- 275 home renovation centres and hardware stores in Quebec, Ontario and the Maritimes

### **SOLLIO IS FOOD**

- \$4.5 billion in sales
- 14,000 employees
- 1<sup>st</sup> largest Canadian pork producer
- 65 countries exported to
- 27 plants producing fresh and secondary-processed pork and poultry products
- 6 distribution centres
- 5 provinces with Olymel facilities: Quebec, New Brunswick, Ontario, Saskatchewan and Alberta



COOPERATIVE FEDEREE  
FARM PRODUCE  
PRODUIT AGRICOLES  
QUEBEC

LIST OF  
AGRICULTURAL  
MACHINERY  
FOR SALE

8244





### **Sollio: passion with a purpose**

It is not every day that a Quebec business celebrates its 100th anniversary, and it is a great honour for FCC to celebrate this exceptional moment in Sollio's history.

Cooperatives—whether local, national or even international—all share a similar business model and, above all, common values. These values are the impetus behind the cooperative spirit that is recognized the world over as a source of wealth and innovation, in both agriculture and agri-food.

The commitment and passion that have always driven Sollio are a sure sign of good things to come. At FCC, we share these same values. We wish Sollio another successful 100 years as it continues to shape its business model in tune with these ever-changing times.

**From all of us at FCC, congratulations to Sollio's members and employees, and happy centennial!**



### **Desjardins and Sollio: 2 cooperatives with a lot in common**

The story of Sollio Cooperative Group is the story of Quebec farming and its modernization. Over the past 100 years, this agri-food giant has successfully managed to keep up with the times and become one of the province's flagship organizations.

Staying relevant for more than a century involves being able to innovate and continually striving to improve. Sollio has proven its ability to remain modern and adapt to the changing needs of its members. Desjardins is extremely proud to partner with Sollio and support its achievements, which benefit the communities we serve.

Supporting development outside Quebec's urban centres has always been—and continues to be—an important priority for both our cooperatives. What's more, our common values of mutual aid and solidarity reflect our shared drive to build a solid and sustainable economy.

**Desjardins extends its warmest wishes to Sollio on the occasion of its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary!**

## Banque Scotia.

Scotiabank is pleased to celebrate this important milestone in the history of Sollio Cooperative Group.



BMO would like to congratulate Sollio Cooperative Group on its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Thank you for your trust and loyalty throughout all those years. Long live Sollio!



Agropur would like to congratulate Sollio Cooperative Group on 100 years of working in the Quebec and Canada-wide agricultural industries. Agropur and Sollio share a rich cooperative history built on common values, including solidarity and the pooling of resources. From their respective beginnings, our two organizations have worked together to build a more just and equitable world, while remaining important drivers of social and economic development. This milestone confirms that the cooperative model is alive and well in Quebec. Happy 100<sup>th</sup> birthday!



### **Rabobank congratulates Sollio on its centennial celebration.**

Sollio's ability to amplify the synergy of partnerships across both agriculture and sustainability spaces has paved a path filled with incredible achievements. We look forward to continue working with Sollio as we champion our mission of growing a better world together.

## FASKEN

Congratulations to Sollio on 100 years of helping Quebec and Canadian society to flourish! Fasken considers it a great privilege to have the opportunity to collaborate with a century-old organization that has never ceased to evolve and take on new challenges to become a leader that cultivates, builds and nourishes communities everywhere.

There is no doubt that the contribution of Sollio and its team to this region's economic strength and development over the past 100 years is a sign of an equally promising future!



The Fonds de solidarité FTQ is proud to have supported the growth of a cooperative as well known as Sollio Cooperative Group these last ten years, and we are pleased to join in celebrating its 100-year anniversary!

Investing in the cooperative model has allowed us to build on our shared value of solidarity and support the economic and social development of SCG's member organizations.

This partnership has been an honour from the start, and we hope that our collaborative relationship will endure for a very long time. Happy 100<sup>th</sup>!

Benoit Tétrault,  
*Director of Private Equity and Impact Investments,  
Agri-Food and Health*





## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was made possible by Sollio Cooperative Group's commitment to commemorating its one hundredth year, and it was a great honour to be chosen to write it. Throughout the process, many people lent a hand. At Sollio, Elizabeth Thompson, Samar Gharib and the team at *Coopérateur* magazine all spring to mind. In the last stretch, Anouk Petit, Communications Director, played a particularly key role in collaborating with various colleagues to make sure that the final manuscript would be accessible to as many people as possible. The book also benefitted from many pleasant and fruitful conversations with Stéphanie Couturier, Senior Vice President of Communications. Behind the scenes, there were also the members of Sollio's internal peer-review. At Groupe Fides, Pascal Genêt deftly handled the editorial work and chose the illustrations, with the support of HEC Montréal staff, who provided archival access, and Sollio Cooperative Group's own Nadine Kadé, whose impeccable memory was a prized asset.

I wish to extend my heartfelt thanks to you all for contributing to this book and paying homage to one hundred years of collective success, an incredible milestone for not only this organization but also the history of the cooperative movement in Quebec and Canada!

*Jean-Pierre Girard,  
Montreal, September 2022*



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# NOTES

**Note:** The \* symbol indicates a reference to the work of author Jacques Saint-Pierre. Unless otherwise indicated, all websites were consulted between July 15 and 20, 2022.

## Reference abbreviations

### ACCPEDQ

Archives of the Confédération des caisses populaires et d'économie Desjardins

### AHEC

Archives of the École des hautes études commerciales

### ANQ

Archives nationales du Québec

### AUPA

Archives of the Union des producteurs agricoles

### BAnQ

Bibliothèque et archives nationales du Québec

### DACR

Department of Agriculture for Canada report

### DAQR

Department of Agriculture of Quebec report

### DISR

Dairy Industry Society report

### DISPQR

Dairy Industry Society of the Province of Quebec report

## 1–The origins of Sollio (1900–1922)

- 1 This document may be consulted upon request to the Sollio communications department.
- 2 \*"L'aviculture se développe rapidement dans le comté de Bonaventure," *Le Journal d'agriculture et d'horticulture* 18, no. 9 (Mar. 15, 1915): 200.
- 3 Jacques Lemay, *Parcours d'une coopérative agroalimentaire. Purdel, 1928-2008* (Quebec City: Septentrion, 2008), 22.
- 4 The Boerenbond, or the Belgian farmers' league, is a Catholic professional union that includes parish corporations and associations.
- 5 \*Anatole Vanier, "Statuts art. 2, Notre œuvre," *Le Québec agricole* 1, no. 1 (Mar. 14, 1919): 32.
- 6 "Montreal — Comp. Coop." Laiteries du Québec, Laiteries du Québec, [laiteriesduquebec.com](http://laiteriesduquebec.com).
- 7 \*Louis Lavallée, "Rapport de la SCA des producteurs de semences" (DAQR, 1916–1917), 215.
- 8 \*Alphonse Bégin, "Coopérative fédérée de Québec" (dissertation, École des hautes études commerciales, 1941), 9.
- 9 Côté, op. cit. 39.
- 10 \**Le Soleil* stated that 500 people attended, but *Le Devoir* and *L'Action catholique* estimated that there were 200 people in attendance (cf. issues of

Nov. 2, 1922). *Le Bulletin des agriculteurs* made note of 250 to 300 people in attendance and 1,000 proxy votes (vol. 7, no. 46, Nov. 18, 1922, 3). Agronomist Jean-Baptiste Cloutier also recorded 300 people ("La fusion des coopératives centrales," *Le Journal d'agriculture* 26, no. 5 [Nov. 1922]: 63.).

- 11 \*"Duel Caron-Ponton à la coopérative," *L'Évènement* (Quebec City, QC), Nov. 2, 1922, 1. Eight members of the Coopérative centrale expressed their dissent on the record.
- 12 It was therefore a private act.

## 2–The early years of Sollio (1923–1929)

- 13 Saint-Pierre noted that the total number of employees at the time is unknown.
- 14 \*AHEC, Fonds Coopérative fédérée, "Procès-verbal du conseil d'administration, Rapport de Joseph-Félix Desmarais, gérant général," (minutes, 1931). This data covers the period from 1926 to 1930.
- 15 \*"Rapport de l'assemblée générale annuelle de la Coopérative fédérée de Québec," *Le Bulletin de la ferme* 15, no. 7 (Feb. 17, 1927): 118.
- 16 \*AHEC, Fonds Coopérative fédérée, "Minutes du conseil exécutif, 7 mars et 4 octobre 1923" (minutes, Apr. 14, 1924).

- 17 \*It appears that this idea was copied from cooperatives in the Southern United States, where growers of oranges, grapes, etc. agreed to deliver their entire harvests to their cooperative over a given period. In Quebec, this arrangement was first applied to the sale of fish by fishermen's cooperatives in the Gaspé Peninsula. Raoul Dumaine, *La Coopérative fédérée*, (DISR, 1924) 85–86.
- 18 \*AHEC, Fonds Coopérative fédérée, "Assemblée du 15 février 1927." (meeting).

### 3–Sollio and the Great Depression (1930–1939)

- 19 "Introduction historique," Assemblée nationale du Québec, Assemblée nationale du Québec, <http://www.assnat.qc.ca/fr/travaux-parlementaires/assemblee-nationale/17-4/introduction-historique.html?retourVersHistoire=oui>.
- 20 The Saint-Henri mill was the property of the Quebec government at the time.
- 21 \*"Rapport de l'assemblée générale annuelle de la Coopérative fédérée de Québec, le 17 février 1932," *Le Bulletin de la ferme* 20, no. 9 (Mar. 3, 1932): 97.
- 22 \*Albert Rioux, "La centralisation des beurreries et fromageries," *La Terre de chez nous* 5, no. 17 (Feb. 1, 1933): 257.
- 23 "LA COOP AGRILAIT," Agrilait Coop, La Coop Agrilait, <http://www.agrilait-coop.com/index.php?pg=nous>.
- 24 \*AHEC, Fonds Coopérative fédérée, "Vieux dossiers, Comptoir coopératif de Montréal [sic], compte-rendu de l'entrevue accordé aux marchands de farine et de grain de la province de Québec par le ministre de l'Agriculture" (interview transcript, Nov. 18, 1933).
- 25 \*"Assemblée annuelle de la Coopérative fédérée," *Le Bulletin des agriculteurs* 21, no. 5, (Feb. 6, 1936): 6.
- 26 Ibid. 44.
- 27 \*Oscar Gatineau, "Sur la Coopérative fédérée," *Le Bulletin des agriculteurs* 19, no. 7 (Feb. 15, 1934): 1.
- 28 \*"Vente coopérative des agneaux de la vallée de la Chaudière," *La Terre de chez nous* 9, no. 3 (Oct. 14, 1936): 8.
- 29 \*J.-E Bisson, "La coopérative canadienne du bétail de Québec, Ltée," *La Terre de chez nous* 12, no. 18 (Jan 31, 1940): 23.
- 30 \*J.-R. Belzile, "La succursale de Québec," *La Terre de chez nous* 12, no. 18 (Jan. 31, 1940): 16.
- 31 \*J.-Omer Bélanger, "La succursale de Rimouski," *La Terre de chez nous* 12, no. 18 (Jan. 31, 1940): 18–19.
- 32 \*(DISR, 1934), 36–37.
- 33 \*"Section de la coopération" (DAQR, 1932–33), 22.
- 34 \*L.-P. Deslongchamps, "La vie coopérative," *Le Journal d'agriculture* 39, no. 37 (Mar. 14, 1936): 12.
- 35 \*L.-P. Deslongchamps, "La vie coopérative," *Le Journal d'agriculture* 39, no. 50 (June 13, 1936): 12.
- 36 \*3 Geo. VI, c 39, *Statutes of the Province of Quebec 1939*, 175–176. It would be increased to \$300,000 in 1942 (6 Geo. VI, c 39, 281).
- 37 \*"Division des produits laitiers," (DACR, 1939–1940) 135–136.
- 38 \*"La caisse populaire rurale et l'aide aux coopératives," *Revue Desjardins* 9, no. 8 (Oct. 1943): 145.
- 39 "Conseil supérieur de la coopération | Exposition virtuelle de la FSS," Faculté des sciences sociales, Université Laval, <https://www.expo-virtuelle.fss.ulaval.ca/decole-faculte/conseil-superieur-de-la-cooperation>.

### 4–The largest French-Canadian company (1940–1956)

- 40 \*Gérard Filion, "Changement pour le mieux" *Le Devoir* 46, no. 29 (Montreal, QC), Feb. 5, 1955.
- 41 \*"Le tracteur Oliver Super 55," *La Terre de chez nous* 26, no. 26 (Aug. 25, 1954): 6.
- 42 \*"Autres cours de mécanique agricole," *La Terre de chez nous* 22, no. 49 (Jan 31, 1951): 4.
- 43 \*Jacques Mordret, *La Coopérative fédérée et son efficacité. Introduction à la recherche d'une planification en vue de la promotion de la Centrale, s.l.*, (1960), 57.
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