



Richard Hennick, left, and his son Jordan run Hemsleys jewelry store. The business, which was established in Old Montreal in 1870, marks its 150th anniversary this year. *PIERRE OBENDRAUF*

A PRICELESS 150 YEARS OF HISTORY

Local institution Hemsleys adapts to changing times

T'CHA DUNLEVY

Richard Hennick had a nine-month advertising campaign lined up to mark Hemsleys' 150th anniversary. "We're the oldest jeweller in Canada," Hennick said of his store, which first opened in Old Montreal in 1870.

Hemsleys added an "uptown" location at University St. (now Robert-Bourassa Blvd.) and Ste-Catherine St. in the early 1930s and headed for the 'burbs in 2004.

"We had the whole (campaign) planned with the Gazette," Hennick continued. "We were going to start the rollout beginning in March. We've been advertising with the Gazette for over 60 years. When the store was downtown, we used to run full-page ads like they were going out of style."

The pandemic put a damper on the celebrations but, following a two-month shutdown at the beginning of the lockdown, Hemsleys is back in business, and business is steady.

Customers filtered into the family-run store, just off Highway 40 in Pointe-Claire, last Thursday afternoon. Hennick and his son Jordan spoke with pride of their business's long-standing connection to our city's history, while Hennick's accountant wife, Iris, worked away in the office upstairs.

As the story goes, Richard Hemsley came to Montreal from Liverpool, England, in 1867, at the age of 32. Equipped with a Bowie knife and a revolver, the watchmaker had been en route to Chicago, but saw opportunity in our growing city.

Three years later, with \$90 to his name, Hemsley opened a tiny jewelry shop on Notre-Dame St. (then called St-Joseph). He slept in the store on a hammock, and had to fend off rats, thieves and at least one flood before taking over another jeweller's shop, on St-James St. (now St-Jacques), in 1889.

He printed the Hemsley name on the iconic clock that stood on the sidewalk out front, where it remained for another 93 years. The city removed the clock while making repairs to the road and sidewalk in 1982.

"I moved here in '83 and started looking for it," Hennick said. "I found it once, in a warehouse in St-Michel, laying on its side. Two years later, one of my suppliers was ready to rebuild it and put it in our store, but the city said, 'Sorry, we don't have that warehouse anymore.'"

Hennick grew up in the jewelry business. His father opened a factory in Toronto in 1946 (which Hennick's brother still runs).

"We manufactured for all the big boys," he said, "Eaton's, the Bay,

Simpsons, Consumers (Distributing), Peoples, Mappins, Kerns."

The family bought several jewelry stores over the next few decades; only Hemsleys, which they acquired in 1960, is still going.

Hennick swears it's sheer coincidence that he shares Richard Hemsley's first name and initials.

"Five kids in my family, and I'm the one who ended up here," he said.

Fate surely had a hand in it. He met Iris, "a Chomedey girl," within six months of arriving in Montreal to find a new manager for the store. He never left.

Hennick still takes calls for "Mr. Hemsley," playfully informing customers that the man they're looking for died nearly 90 years ago, in 1931. (The store was then sold to the Herman family — again with the H!)

The year before his death, the Gazette published Hemsley's autobiography. Hennick has a time-worn, autographed copy in his office, dedicated to then-mayor of Westmount, George Hogg.

As for his family's connection to Hemsley's name and legacy, he feels it every day.

"It's the same group of faces and customers," Hennick said, "the same names and heritage. I get people coming in, saying, 'This ring is a little tight on me, I bought it at the downtown store.'"

"And they have the old bill, with my father's handwriting on it," Jordan added, wearing an original Hemsleys watch given to him by a loyal customer.

"We have ads upstairs from 1948 from the Gazette and the Montreal Star," Hennick said.

When it comes to competition, Hemsleys welcomes it. For decades, the store at University and Ste-Catherine was on the same block as another Montreal jewelry institution, Birks. But when it comes to longevity, Hemsleys has Birks beat by nine years; the latter opened on St. James St. in 1879.

And while Birks is the bigger business, Hennick doesn't hesitate to toot his own horn.

"We're family-run and operated, and we treat people like family," he said. "(Birks is) corporate. The value for your dollar is much better here than it is there, because we're a mom-and-pop organization. We're hands-on."

Last January, after years of prodding, Jordan finally convinced his parents to let him revamp the store's website. The timing couldn't have been better, giving Hemsleys a jump on online business when the lockdown began.

He started cataloguing the store's vast inventory — an ongoing project — and created a section about Hemsleys' history, complete

with pictures and a 1971 newspaper article about the clock.

"We probably have close to 1,000 products on there, and we're adding every day," Jordan said of the website.

There's a lot more to go. The company's expanded suburban locale allows the Hennicks to carry far more product than they used to, and a broader range, catering to all types of customers.

"We tailor to anybody from a \$50 price point to \$25-\$30-\$40,000," Jordan said. "Sometimes you can get into six figures, for something custom-made. But what's nice is, whether it's a \$50 purchase or \$50,000 purchase, you get the same attention to detail, the same packaging. We try to do the same thing for everybody, no matter how much you're spending."

A self-professed "watch geek," Jordan has refined Hemsleys' watch selection in the decade he has been at the store.

"Back in 1989, when we renovated the (downtown) store, our most expensive watch was a Movado at \$995," said his father. "We had really stepped into the big leagues. Now our watches go from \$400 to \$45,000. That's just how the industry has changed."

With such a vast selection, the website has become increasingly important — particularly with customers spending less time in the store since the beginning of the pandemic.

"A lot of the inquiries are coming from locals," Hennick said. "They know us already. They're not buying online, but they're doing their homework and chatting (with us). Once the work is done, they make appointments."

"That's the thing with jewelry: you've got to try it on."

And that's where the Hennicks have something in common with Richard Hemsley.

"I think (he was known for) his quality and his service," Hennick said, "and we've kept that going. We'll bend over backwards for a customer. You have to in today's world. A lot of people who come in the door, either we know them or they know us."

For customers they're meeting for the first time, the Hemsleys name and 150-year story goes a long way toward establishing a sense of trust.

"It's interesting for customers to know that we've been around, and we're going to give them an honest opinion," Hennick said. "If something happens, they have somewhere to come to, and they can come to the owners, because one of us is always here."

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Osheaga takes chance, announces headliners for 2021

Foo Fighters, Cardi B, Post Malone booked for 15th edition of music festival

T'CHA DUNLEVY

Call it a little ray of sunshine from deep within the red zone of the pandemic, amid the cold and grey of December.

Osheaga announced its 2021 headliners on Monday morning. Foo Fighters, Cardi B and Post Malone will top the bill on (respectively) Friday, Saturday and Sunday, July 30 to Aug. 1. Fingers crossed.

Tickets went on sale Monday morning for the festival's long-awaited 15th edition, at the cost of \$325 for all three days. Osheaga is offering a four-payment plan until Jan. 15, and a two-pay-

We're very conscious that if people don't feel safe, they're not going to come. And if it's not safe, we won't be doing a festival.

ment plan from Jan. 16 to April 15.

Foo Fighters are the only carry-over from last summer's COVID-cancelled event, which also had rappers Kendrick Lamar and Lizzo. Cardi B headlined Montreal's Metro Metro festival in 2019, but has never played Osheaga. This will be Post Malone's third time at Osheaga and first time headlining.

Reaction on social media was a mix of jubilation and skepticism. Many expressed enthusiasm at the chance to see Post Malone, others for Cardi B. But others questioned whether it would be safe to go if it happens at all.

Reached Monday afternoon, Osheaga director Nick Farkas understood some people's apprehension, but was heartened by the generally positive reaction to the announcement.



Cardi B is scheduled headline the second day of the 2021 Osheaga festival on Saturday, July 31. Tickets for the event's long-awaited 15th edition went on sale Monday morning. *SUZANNE CORDEIRO/AFP FILES*

"There hasn't been a lot of things to get excited about lately," he said. "Everyone is hopeful that life will return to normal someday."

Part of the reason for the announcement was to reassure the 10,000 ticket-holders who still haven't sought refunds following this year's non-festival, and whose tickets are still good for next year.

"We wanted to let them know who's playing, to give them a reason to hold on to their tickets, and give other people reasons to come."

Farkas is the first to admit that under the circumstances, revealing the headliners for a massive summertime gathering of almost 50,000 people per day is a rather large leap of faith.

"Obviously, we know what's happening in the world right now," he said. "We're all living it. We knew (the question of whether the festival will realistically take place) would come up."

"What we're trying to do is to say we'll put on a safe festival, within whatever parameters we're allowed to. But we have to move on. We have to continue to work on this. We can't wait until the perfect time; it's not the reality of how things are programmed. A lot of work goes into it."

Announcing the headliners is no guarantee that Osheaga will take place. Farkas and his team already watched their event get cancelled once, back in April, as Quebec banned all festivals through the end of August. And that may well happen again next year. Even if festivals are allowed to happen, there are a lot of unknowns.

"We're very conscious that if people don't feel safe, they're not going to come," he said. "And if it's not safe, we won't be doing a festival."

"It sucks. Everyone is in a terrible situation. But if we wait, then there's no festival and we have to wait another year. We have to take a chance."

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