



# RUE WEST ST.

POLITIQUE MUNICIPALE | MUNICIPAL POLITICS



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## Harvey West

It should come as no surprise that West Street ends near the tracks of the Algoma Central Railroad. A trip back in time will surely help convince you.

Close your eyes and imagine a cold February night in 1919. It's two o'clock in the morning and Harvey West has just stepped off the train that brought him to... Hazel. You read that right, Hazel, not Hearst. This is 1919, remember. We are one kilometre west of what will be downtown Hearst and there is no station. The train has



stopped there, and a young man gets off. The crew throws his luggage in the snow. Alone and disoriented, Harvey West sees a lighted window at the end of the field. He decides to go towards this bright landmark. The luggage stays there, it can wait. Harvey West's new life was about to begin.

You can now open your eyes. It is the 1920s and Harvey West has quickly taken control of his destiny. Young, enterprising, and ambitious, he established West & Co., a general store on Front Street where he sold food, clothing, gas, and sleds, among other things. At the time, the town was still very small, with a population of 700 to 1,000, but the business grew rapidly as settlers and workers had a need for everything.

It was also at this time that Harvey met Gertrude Howard. The young woman was the daughter of the town's first pharmacist. The young couple got married and started a family. By 1940, the couple had six children.

The Depression of the 1930s was a difficult time for the country as it was for the region. Jobs dried up, money was tight, and many businesses went bankrupt. Still, people had to eat. Because of this hardship, West allowed people to buy on credit. It was a risk he took because at the end of each month, it was not possible for everyone to pay off their accumulated

debt. Thus, once the economy recovered, on the eve of the Second World War, the merchant found himself with a pile of unpaid accounts.

It is important to understand that in the 1930s, because Hearst was a railway town, freight trains loaded with men on their way to Western Canada in search of work stopped at the station to fill up on water and coal. The station, now built, stood right in front of West & Co. and it was to this business that passengers, both stowaways and otherwise, headed. When the first train arrived at the station, business seemed good for the shopkeeper. However, once the train left, the shelves were bare and Harvey noticed that for every item sold, four had been stolen. He had learned a valuable lesson and installed a counter with closed doors to restrict access to customers. Customers now had to order and pay to receive the goods they wanted. This also gave the store a stylish look.

Harvey West was also a community advocate who understood the virtues of buying local. Among his adages, here's one that resonates a bit more with current times: "Wages earned in town should be spent in town." Isn't that a rule to bear in mind in these days of online shopping?

In 1967, West & Co. changed hands to become Blais Supermarket, but the Wests kept the building until 1979. Harvey West was always loyal to Hearst, to the community that he and Gertrude helped build.

The street that bears his name pays tribute to the three terms as mayor for which Harvey West was elected. The history of Hearst should remind us that the businessman was also a politician involved in municipal life, in education, in his church, and on the town council. Other streets in Hearst honour people who have served as mayor. Among them are Houle, Aubin, Boulley, Brisson, Flood, Holler, McManus, McNee, Mongeon and Powell Streets.

- *Terry West*

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