

Saving Belleville's Memorial Arena



This iconic building is in danger of disappearing

by **A.R. Champion**, *Los Angeles*

I love hockey to the point that Canadians have asked me if I'm Canadian. I'm not. I live in Los Angeles, but am originally from a small town in Virginia. Incredibly, that is where I was introduced to the game, when the Eastern Hockey League granted a franchise to the Salem—later renamed Roanoke Valley—Rebels, in what surely was the most improbable place for a professional hockey team imaginable.

As someone who loves both hockey and historic buildings, it was inevitable that my work as an architectural designer and my passion for the sport would lead me to fall in love with old arenas. That's how I discovered Belleville, Ont.

Belleville is a small, picture-postcard-beautiful city on the Bay of Quinte. It's known for its gorgeous examples of architecture from the 19th century, and has a long history, having, ironically, been settled in 1789 by Americans loyal to the Crown who fled north after our Revolutionary War.

Belleville is also a veritable hockey factory. In addition to the countless prominent players who were either born or played there, it has among its many architectural treasures one of the very few surviving pre-1930 arenas in North America, the 1929 Memorial Arena. This uniquely beautiful and special place is one of hockey's holiest shrines.

The Memorial anchors Belleville's

charming Market Square in the heart of downtown, and has always been an important part of the community. To walk through its doors is to walk into living history. Not having been significantly altered through the years, it is a breathtakingly intact time capsule that instantly takes you back to the era of "old time hockey."

It still has its original scoreboard, unpainted fir ceiling and wonderful double wooden seats, but what makes the Memorial unique among its four remaining contemporaries in Canada is its unusual "square" corners. Instead of following the normal curve, its boards make the turns with wide, flat panels set at angles. It also has a single—that's

right, one—penalty box, which naturally adds to its lore.

The Memorial also played an important role in a huge Canadian victory on the international stage at a time when the Cold War was at its most intense. In the late '50s, the world lived in fear of nuclear attack from the Soviet Union, but in 1959, Canada defeated the Soviets in battle—on a hockey rink behind the Iron Curtain in Prague, Czechoslovakia.

The team that won that battle to become world champions was the Belleville McFarlands, and the Memorial was their home ice. Their skill and toughness were the stuff of legends. In a time when the NHL was a mere six teams, they were on

Top left: Admiring the Memorial Arena's virtually unchanged vintage interior. Below: The 1959 world champion Belleville McFarlands.

a par with the best of them.

We're not lucky enough to have places like the Memorial in the United States, so my introduction to the sport I love was in our brand-spanking-new Civic Center, where the only character in the building was provided by the guys on the ice. By now I've actually touched the Stanley Cup, but another one of my dreams is to experience a game in a beautiful, intimate old barn full of great hockey memories and great hockey still to come, where the spectators are "the seventh man on the ice" and where players love to play—the kind of historic place that made this incredible game what it is today.

Sadly, this proud and beloved building that has nurtured so many champions now needs a champion of its own. Although structurally sound, Belleville's remarkable Memorial Arena has been closed since

December 2010 due to a problem with the refrigeration system. Despite the fact that the needed repairs are fairly routine, its future is alarmingly uncertain.

On his web page devoted to our cherished long-gone Rebels, Pat Garrett, a friend from my hometown, says, "When young, one tends to think that everything will last forever." He's right. It's much too easy for all of us, no matter where we're from, to take for granted what we've known all our lives.

Belleville's Memorial Arena should not be taken for granted, for it is not just a Canadian treasure, but one for the entire world to enjoy. Last September, on the *Hockey Night in Canada* broadcast of the Capitals-Jets preseason game in Belleville, a hockey-loving Canadian treasured by many, Don Cherry, said as much. I may be an American, but I'm with you, Coach. ■



TEAM PHOTO FROM THE COLLECTION OF DR. T. I. WOODLEY

Thanks to Betty Jane Burkitt of Belleville, Ont., for bringing this story to our attention. For more information, head to www.bellevillememorialarena.com (under development as we went to press).