

MONTREAL

Batshaw issues 'cry for help'

In desperate need of foster parents

KAREN SEIDMAN
THE GAZETTE

A desperate need for foster parents to care for a record number of children who have been removed from their families spurred the Batshaw Youth and Family Centres to hold an open house on the West Island yesterday.

Pierrefonds residents Kathy Doyle and Charles Stenger showed up clutching a paper advertising the open house. They were there, they said, because it read like "a cry for help."

It was. "We do have a crisis because of a lack of foster homes in the West Island and all over the city," said Rena Rubin, a foster-home recruitment worker for Batshaw.

"We've never had so many children for whom we are actively recruiting," she said in an interview. "We have a very ongoing need, and it has been steadily more difficult to find homes."

For the past six months, there have been at least 150 children waiting for an assessment from the Youth Protection Department, according to Sharon Lazar, program manager for non-institutional resources at Batshaw.

Rubin said there are 40 children throughout the city - and at least 10 in the West Island - who are in need of foster homes.

"We prefer not having to move children from their community," Rubin said. "It's important to go to the same school, have the same friends. The less change the better. Sometimes, geographic location is very important."

Lazar said there are a number of reasons for what she called a "serious crisis" with the shortage of foster homes.

Part of the problem is that 47 spots in group homes and youth centres recently have been eliminated because of budget cuts, creating more need.

She also said that the political uncertainty in Quebec makes it difficult to recruit foster parents because economic difficulty and instability impede the commitment to be a foster parent.

While Batshaw is considering several changes to the way it operates in the wake of the discovery by police last month of a sex-slave ring in Notre Dame de Grâce district that recruited teenage girls from some of its detention facilities and group homes, Rubin said that problem has nothing to do with foster homes.

At the open house yesterday, Delia Walton's sweatshirt said it all: "Foster parents have open homes, open hearts, open minds and forever building love and trust."

Lazar said there is a real need for more foster parents because of the number of children in need and because "we are placing too much burden on the ones we have."

But there is no such thing as too many foster children for foster parent Vonnie Ruggles, who will be setting her Christmas table for 14 this year in anticipation of a visit from many of the children she has helped - a total of 27 over 14 years.

Ruggles also helps foster parents through their orientation, and yesterday she was happily answering questions from Doyle and Stenger, who are deciding if fostering a child is something they want to do.

Ruggles didn't hesitate when asked about the rewards of being a foster parent: "These tykes come in with baggage - they might have been hungry, abused, missed a lot of school. To look at my kids and know that I played a role in making life better for them is the greatest reward."

Rubin said the open house was arranged to allow prospective foster parents to hear about the rewards and challenges of foster care in an informal, non-threatening environment.

There is another open house today from 10:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. at 6 Weredale Park in Westmount.

Deformed frogs may signal trouble for environment

MARK ABLEY
THE GAZETTE

Some are missing limbs; some have an extra limb. Others have limbs fused together. A few have eyes or other organs protruding from their backs or shoulders.

All these abnormalities and more have been found in frogs and toads collected in the St. Lawrence River valley in the past four years. The hundreds of grotesque amphibians offer disturbing evidence that something might be badly wrong with the environment of southern Quebec.

"The frogs are a sentinel," said Martin Ouellet, a veterinarian now studying for his PhD at McGill University. "The more we look, the more deformities we find."

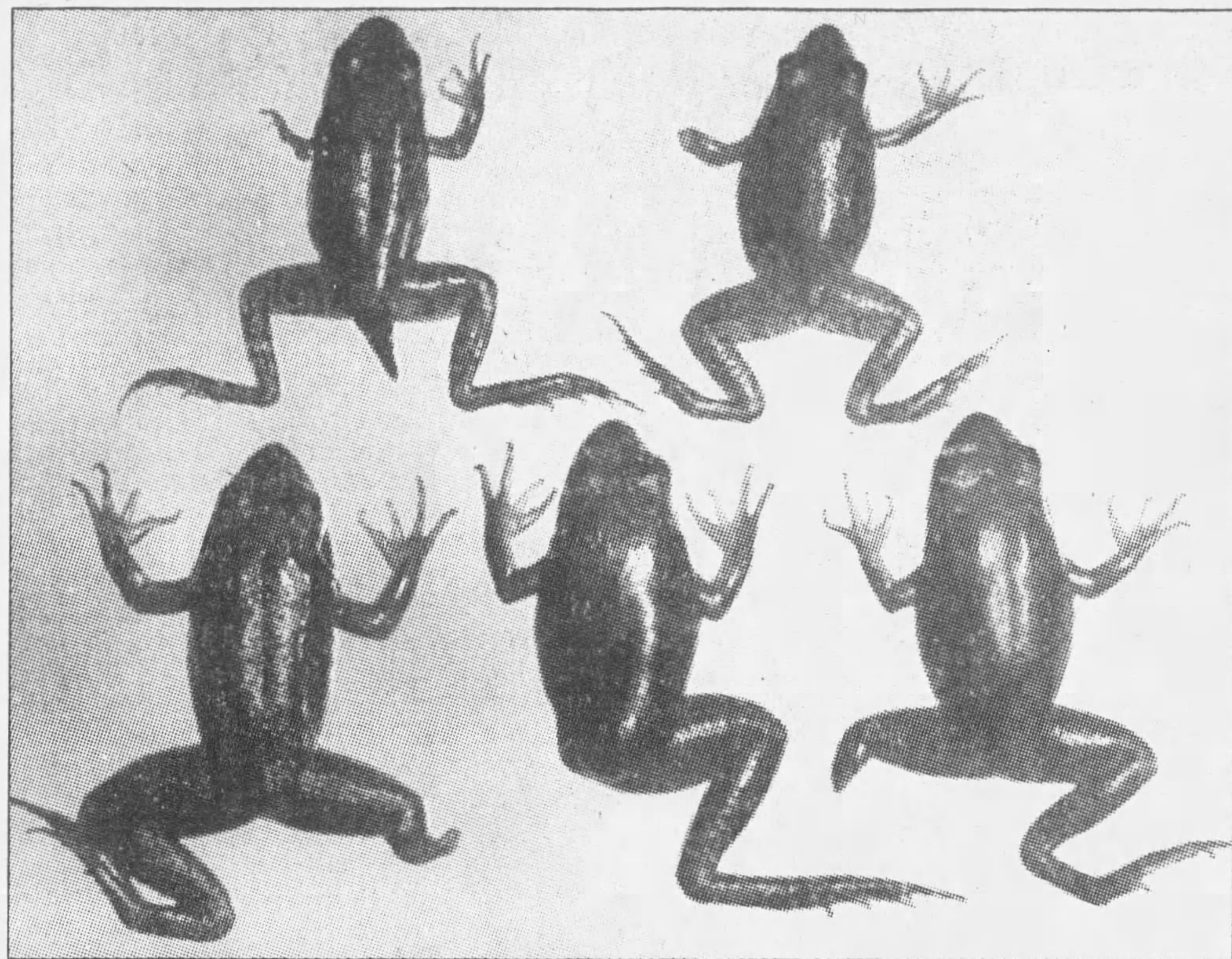
If Quebec's amphibians are in trouble, they're not alone. Since the late 1980s, alarm bells have been ringing among scientists worldwide. From California to Australia, Costa Rica to Europe, many frog and toad populations appear to be in steep decline. Some have gone extinct. Nobody knows why.

Many culprits have been suggested - ozone depletion, airborne pollution and climate change among them. But according to David Green, an associate professor of biology who works at the Redpath Museum of McGill University, the evidence from eight affected species in Quebec points to local causes:

"Most of the deformities here have been observed in pond-dwelling frogs. Particularly in green frogs, which hibernate in ponds. So if there's an accumulation of nasty stuff in the sediment, they'll be exposed to it."

By "nasty stuff," he means agricultural chemicals. In their research, which is sponsored by the Canadian Wildlife Service, Green and Ouellet have looked at frog habitat stretching on both sides of the St. Lawrence River from Montreal east to Montmagny. Their findings are still preliminary; they also are highly suggestive.

Of the 4,286 juvenile frogs that Ouellet has collected in ponds beside work-



MARTIN OUELLET

Deformed amphibians found in the St. Lawrence River valley offer disturbing evidence that something might be badly wrong with the environment of southern Quebec.

ing farms, 300 (7 per cent) were deformed. Animals in a few ponds had a much higher incidence - up to 67 per cent. But among the young frogs Ouellet collected from a control group of ponds elsewhere in the region (abandoned farms, pastures or woodlands), the rate of deformity was 1.5 per cent.

"And in the same pond," Ouellet said, "you have many species with deformities. So it can't be a genetic problem with just a single species."

In September, Ouellet attended a workshop of North American Amphibian Deformities in Duluth, Minn. Scientists in that agricultural state were among the first to draw attention to the problem. Judy Helgen, a researcher with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, has said, "I'm at different levels of getting a chill down my spine."

"The declines are real," said Green,

national co-ordinator for DAPCAN - the Canadian working group of the Declining Amphibian Populations Task Force, set up in 1990 by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

"Populations are being lost. But in terms of numbers, the losses seem to be worse in western North America than here in the east. Why? Well, populations of amphibians are more scattered out there because of the deserts and mountains. So if a population disappears, it's not easily recolonized."

Green questions one widespread notion: that because frogs and toads breathe through their skin, they are automatically more vulnerable to pollution than other kinds of wildlife.

"But they're certainly more visible," he said. "If you go up to your cottage in the Laurentians, what animals do you see? Squirrels, birds and amphibians.

If you see a fox, what a day! But if you don't see frogs or toads, something's wrong. Toads will hop around on the forest floor, and we have seen some abnormalities among them. But it hasn't jumped out at us - so to speak."

It's in the late summer, when the tadpoles are growing legs and becoming young frogs, that most of the deformities are seen. Next year Ouellet plans to study the hot spots - the places he has found in the St. Lawrence valley with the highest incidence of frog abnormalities. He also intends to try reproducing the abnormalities in the lab.

It will take hard evidence like that to convince the doubters. As Green admits, "many causes combine to create difficulties." For the moment, the one thing beyond dispute is that in Quebec as elsewhere, some amphibians are in serious trouble.

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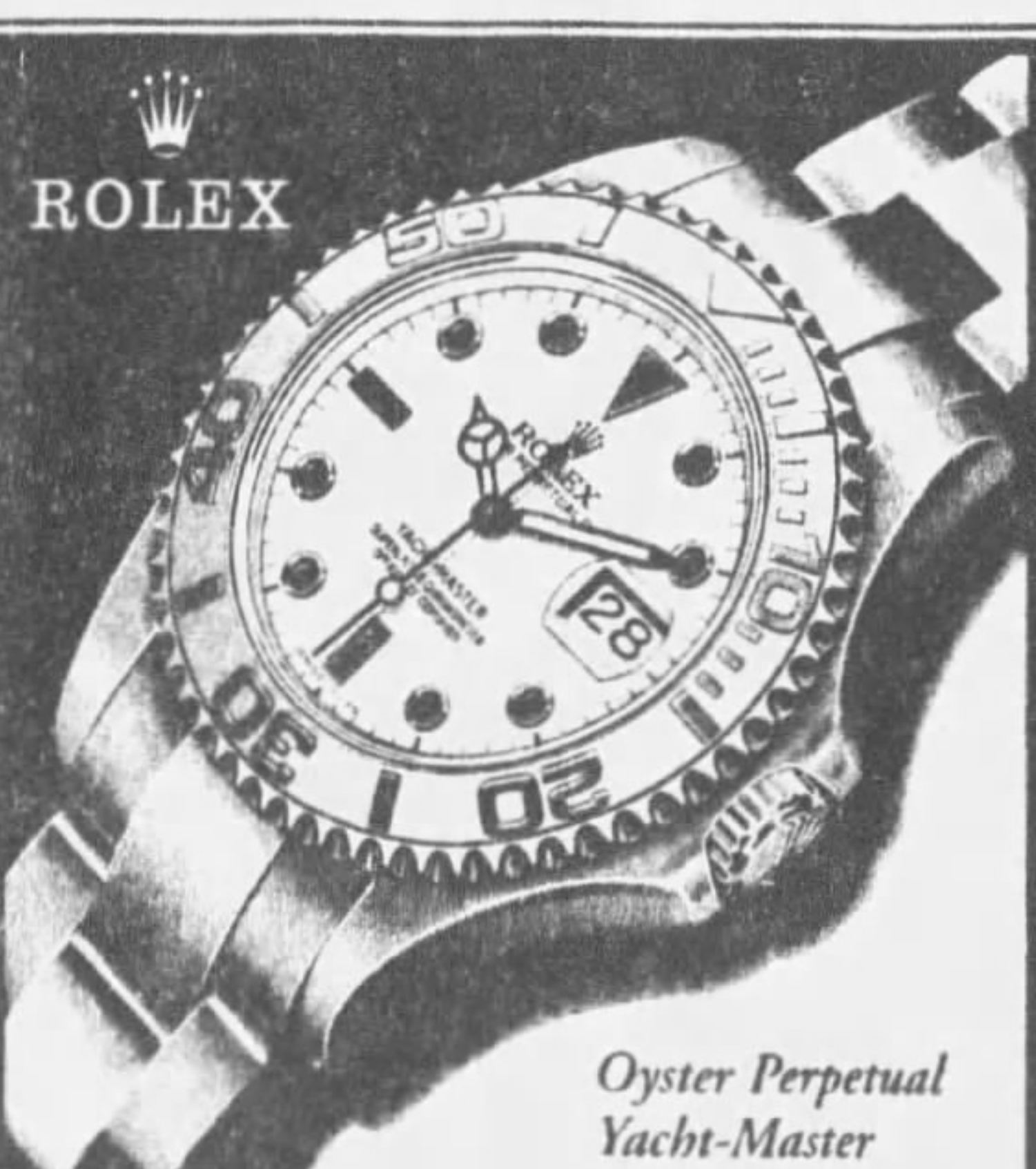
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