

Year 2, weeks 17 – 20

Fête Champêtre: Everyday life in Entre-deux-Eaux

“Of course,” observed my neighbour to our left rather patronisingly, “you would only find this in the countryside”. “This” was an awning beneath the trees with a huge trestle table littered with the remains of crudités, barbecued sausages, pork chops, and empty wine bottles. On wooden benches round it, gesticulating with their plastic forks or shouting for more mustard or bread, the pensioners of Sainte Marguerite were putting the world to rights, and speculating as to where the approaching huge black cloud would release its rain. In the background was a shady fishing pool inherited by one of organisers of the Thursday gym, scrabble and other social events. The lunch started with a bracing (wine, port, rum, and fruit juice) punch (!) around mid day and was drawing to a conclusion by 4.30 when we left. It was designed as a bucolic “prolongation” of the long summer holidays, before the start this week of the winter programme of activities. However, so successful is that village’s programme of activities, that surrounding villagers (like ourselves) participate, as do some elegant “ladies who dine” from St Dié. These ladies are distinguishable at gym session by their shiny leotards (as opposed to our leggings) and at table by their linen jackets and heavy jewellery (whereas fleeces and tracksuits were the village attire).

The conversation round the table got louder and more animated as the meal progressed. After huge slabs of brie, generous portions of charlotte, and black coffee in plastic cups, various odd bottles of home-distilled concoctions were passed around the men – John sampled a plum eau-de-vie. Then an accordion was produced and the singing and dancing started – and even conga chain. One of the St Dié ladies whispered disdainful comments to her friends after being pressed to dance by a flushed villager. It was whilst those at table linked arms and sang lustily, swaying in unison from side to side, that our bench collapsed. Despite my undignified descent with it, I was delighted to see my patronising neighbour on her back waving her legs in the air. Of course it could only happen in the countryside!

The fishing pond looked tranquil and undisturbed the following morning when I passed it on my way to the flamboyant 9th European Patchwork Meeting in Sainte Marie aux Mines. This is a small town on the other side of the mountains, whose prosperity came originally from the silver and lead workings and then from textiles. It was also, as the patchwork leaflet proclaimed, “the cradle of the Amish movement”. All the churches and other large buildings in the town and in three small villages in the Val d’Argent were hung, for the occasion, with wonderful quilts, from the sober plain quilts of the Amish and Mennonites to colourful zebra and giraffe printed cotton patchworks from South Africa. From France came competition silk quilts on the theme of myths and legends of the Brocéliande Forest (disappointingly hideous) and beautiful old cream counterpanes from Provence. There were contemporary variations on Hungarian blue print textiles and some strikingly original Danish riots of colour. Brightly dressed enthusiasts were scrambling over pews to photograph details of quilts, traffic in the narrow streets was reduced to a crawl by the crowds and the overflowing pavement cafés, and the

tent-city of vendors of fabrics and notions looked like a mediaeval tournament in the sunshine. This was, after all, the largest patchwork convention in Europe.

Two days later, we were on the equally crowded main street of the nearby hamlet of La Voivre for their apple festival. We didn't linger round the barrels and bottles of apple juice (too many memories of the hard labour pressing our apples last autumn!), but browsed all the vide-grenier stalls. John spotted a Bakelite Photax camera which he had a hunch could be interesting and paid the vast sum of 2 euro for it. Examples he later found on the internet were dated 1939 and were for sale at around 80 euro. I bought a poetry book. Our friend Nicola, surprisingly, was much taken by the idea of gambling for a rabbit (for your 1.50 euro you could choose a number painted on a coloured wooden stick, which, after all the other sticks were sold, you waved as you urged the rabbit into the hutch of your number and colour). The exhortations were mostly drowned out by the scarlet-clad brass band and majorettes as they marched and twirled the length of the street, turning and marching back again several times. The rabbits seemed to mind the noise less than the Canadian folk group who were attempting to perform simultaneously outside the Mairie as the band passed to and fro. There was the usual large canopy, tables, and benches laid out for diners with the most inefficient ever catering team attempting to co-ordinate barbecuing sausages and frying chips. The two callow youths looked as if they hadn't seen the sunlight for several years and were too bemused to pass on orders or give change and the two granddads were too engrossed in weighty conversation to serve their wares. "Only in the countryside," we could almost hear our St Dié acquaintance observe.

We didn't however sample the sausage and chips the following Sunday at St Dié's huge braderie. Our old dictionary definition of braderie as a stall selling cut-price goods doesn't do justice to this huge commercial fair (fifth largest in France according to one newspaper report) with stalls of clothes and food which spreads its tentacles along all the main streets of the town. All the shopkeepers (who organise the event) decant their goods on to the pavements and hundreds of visiting traders also set up their stalls and microphones. So it was a more cosmopolitan snack of kebabs that we enjoyed there. In one area near the post office and in the market square were all the second hand stalls, where we bought a couple of silver wine tasters, a teapot, and some books. Nicola found some English books in one of the cardboard boxes so she bought an 1862 boys' adventure story to read with her grandson and we bought a Rudyard Kipling and a 1943 "victory edition" Erle Stanley Gardner inscribed "Property of Special Service U.S.A.". (John did wonder whether it was the code book of the Americans who liberated St Dié then moved on, leaving behind their "Case of the buried clock"). Another dealer, who sounded quite inebriated, upon hearing our English voices, pressed two old English language textbooks (from 1903 and 1948) into our hands. The French owner of the 1903 book seems to have struggled to translate an English passage about the "bosom of the ocean" with its "narwhal" and "sword fish", but to have given up completely on the sea birds, including "Mother Carey's chickens" and the "proverbial voracity of the cormorant". (Ah, they don't learn vocabulary like that for French GCSE these days!)

Normally at these events we would see the Mayor of St Dié, posing with his entourage for the cameras. However, he had only been freed the previous day from several days in police custody, and we assumed that he'd had to hurry back to his Paris office (where he's a lawyer) to catch up on work – or even to take advice. The questioning was around the privatisation of St Dié's water supply in 1989 / 1990 and the financial arrangements with Lyonnaise des Eaux. There are bound to be a lot of jokes at his expense when St Dié's prestigious 14th International Geography Festival, of which he is founder and president, opens on 2 October as the theme is "Water and Geography," and one of the sponsors is Lyonnaise des Eaux! He may also be wise to avoid the lecture on "le front d'eau Lyonnais". Corruption aside, I'm also wondering if the cookery sessions will be as imaginative as last year's – with a conference theme of water, the cookery demonstrations run the risk of being a little dull.

The Friday walks continue to be pleasant, and rambling conversations add to our store of local trivia. On the latest walk, one participant, surveying a magnificent panorama from one of the many Roches des Fées, discoursed on how the forest was taking over the old grazing meadows and how France was the only country in which forests were decreasing rather than increasing. Another walker reminisced about the hand beaten copper stills which his father used to manufacture in St Dié, about the large number of stills which there used to be in Entre-deux-Eaux (I had a vague memory that there are only four legally permitted stills in the village now) and about the most magnificent still which his father ever made, which was for Colonel René Fonck (the greatest allied World War One ace you may remember from previous newsletters). This elderly walker remembered helping his father to deliver the still to the (very small) Fonck chateau in Saulcy. And when he started his military service in 1949, the famous Colonel (possibly infamous by now due to probable collaboration with the Germans during World War Two), offered to be his "godfather" in the army! Finally, on the bus back to St Dié, conversation turned to the disgraced current mayor of St Dié. Flora, who many years ago used to work for one of the Paris haut couturiers before returning to the tranquillity of her native Vosges, expressed not the least surprise, considering all politicians, especially those who are also lawyers, to be corrupt. But she was surprised that he had in fact been out and about at the St Dié braderie, smiling and shaking hands as if nothing had happened. And we'd missed his publicity act.

Sometimes, if at a loose end, one of the local newspaper reporters turns up to take a photograph as the walkers gather in a car park in St Dié. Browsing through recent papers in the library I noticed a photo including Paul (Paul and Viv were the last of our summer visitors). It being too late to purchase a copy I went up to neighbour Danielle Laine. Everything in her household finds a use and nothing is discarded. Down in her cellars she had all her newspapers piled up. As you can by now imagine, every paper was there except the Wednesday edition that we wanted! We searched the garage where Pierre had been tinkering, the newspapers round the rabbit food and the bloodstained paper on the food store floor, but alas no trace! So sorry, Paul, that you have no holiday souvenir of your walk with the Society for Walks and Forest Footpaths of Saint Dié des Vosges!

Fortunately Viv had her camera with her on the Sunday of their stay, when we came across a very moving little ceremony above our village, below the cherry tree (also mentioned in earlier letters) where two young men were hanged in September 1944. In front of the monument, which shows the cross of Lorraine of all resistance fighters, were now lined up about fifteen standard bearers from local communes; most were now old men, veterans of the war, but a couple of young boys represented two of the communes. A small band played slow sad military music and a short speech recalled the events: apparently it had been quite a large encounter between maquis (awaiting an arms-drop from a Canadian aircraft) and patrolling Germans. Eventually most of the local maquis escaped into the forest, but two young lads from more distant communes, who didn't know the territory, were captured and hanged on the spot. The local farmer was deported on suspicion of complicity. After the speech, two elderly ladies (presumably relatives), supported by their respective mayors, laid the wreaths and we stood in silence. The hills round here are thick with monuments from both wars and it is good to know that their dead are still individually commemorated.

We enjoyed the last of our summer visitors, culminating in dinner at the appropriately named "Restaurant des Voyageurs". Since then, we've got back to our everyday preoccupations of horticulture and computers. You might be surprised to learn, as we were, that broadband has reached our remote village, but I will leave John to recount his various technical researches at a later date, and pass on to the simpler pleasures of the garden and orchard.

On my last trip down the road to Mme Laine's with a wheel barrow of small green windfall apples, I was honoured to be given a tour of her subterranean store rooms. One was lined with bottles of beans, beetroot, and ratatouille. She was amazed to hear that we freeze all our beans, beetroot, (also carrots and peas) and even ratatouille (but then her freezers are full of sections of animal carcasses – sheep, veal, pig, boar, chickens, geese, etc). She'd run out of ideas for using up her surplus of "courgettes" (actually enormous marrows), and so presented us with one, which John transformed into a dozen pots of marrow and ginger jam. He later rather tentatively presented her with a pot (she's hitherto said English products far too sweet but, in reality just too different). To our amazement, a few days later she voluntarily pronounced the jam excellent, said she'd been eating it every morning and asked for the recipe. When I took down the recipe, we had some discussion about crystallised ginger, so I returned with a spare box of Chinese crystallised ginger for her, only to find her friend, who'd been sampling the jam, was busy copying out the recipe for this English delicacy. I fear that John's recipe has been *too* successful, as there have been no more surplus marrows. And presumably half the village women now have the recipe! We won't be surprised if we see pots for sale at local markets and fairs soon.

Finally, there was a delightful follow-up to Sainte Marguerite's Fête Champêtre. During the meal we noticed one of the St Dié contingent sketching, in time honoured tradition, on the paper tablecloth. But Fanny was not one of the elegant ladies! And her subject had a lean man-in-the-moon face which was creased with smile lines. When he finally realised he'd been immortalised on the tablecloth, his smile reached his ears, and he sat gazing entranced at the torn off fragment of tablecloth throughout the dancing.

Hearing that we were from the rural depths of Entre-deux-Eaux, Fanny swapped places with my patronising neighbour, and asked whether we knew any farms with old barn doors and hens outside. She is preparing some paintings for an exhibition and workshop as part of a farmyard livestock show at the end of October, and there aren't many examples in St Dié. John immediately suggested Farmer Vozelle's. The Vozelles' farm is on an S bend in a narrow lane. You always have to drive cautiously to avoid the geese, chickens, cats, and small excitable dogs who consider that they own that portion of the lane, as well an occasional string tied across to guide the cows to their field. Their barns are no longer old, one having been replaced after a spectacular night blaze and the other having been recently dismantled as it sagged dangerously across the road. His large muck pile, right opposite his front door, is also in danger of spilling onto the road. He is the farmer whose cows only get out to pasture around midday and return in the dark.

Fanny was entranced as we drove round the commune looking at the traditional barn doorways, high enough for loaded haywains to pass through, rounded at the top, and edged with pink sandstone blocks. The wooden doors can have heart shaped ventilation openings, or setting sun patterns in the upper semi-circle, or small doorways cut into the larger ones. In the course of photographing barn doors we chatted to the mayor in his torn vest (he owned a particularly derelict old house and barn behind his modern bungalow) and to an old lady and her cats at the big farm (their dogs used to try to savage Toby when he rode past on his bike). We stood and chatted in the sunshine on the mucky road outside the Vozelles' colourful garden as they scattered soggy bread to encourage their chicks to pose. And finally we visited Danielle Laine's menagerie and Fanny has photographs of all her geese, hens, cocks, rabbits and guinea-fowl. But Fanny's favourite house and barn was a derelict one in Fouchifol, with a peeling barn door (sunset style), a pear tree against the flaking white wall casting complex shadows, and two hesitant kittens peering out. And her pleasure at capturing the real Vosgian countryside was full of wonder, unlike the superior "only in the countryside" of that other dinner at the Fête Champêtre.