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France 1918-2008: Remembering the American Offensive in World War I

"That our children may be patriots, we tell them of our fathers."

By Richard Frisbie

During a recent visit to France, which was planned more for viticulture than history, it became impossible to ignore all the military monuments and cemeteries set in the green fields and vineyards of the beautiful farmland north of Paris.

Vague references to the Western Front, the Maginot Line, and the Battle of Verdun, remembered from my history lessons of so long ago, became clearer as the historic markers and museum displays explained the course of two world wars and the role Americans played in them.

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completely rebuilt after being leveled by the Germans.

The beautiful French countryside is still pockmarked with the holes of mortar shells and crisscrossed with the trenches of both armies. This section of France was a battlefield!

It isn't that Americans don't care about the war, it was that it happened, to quote from popular songs of the period, "over there" and not on our own "home front". Much of my visit was spent explaining that distinction to the people I met, and hearing from the hearts of French men and women how much it meant to them that the Americans came and fought beside them to liberate the French countryside.

Of the 2,084,000 Americans in France in WW I (42 Divisions), 122,500 died - 48,909 in battle. More men died of disease than any other cause. It was a war America fought on foreign soil where, in victory, we asked only for enough land to bury our dead. This year, the 90th anniversary of the end of World War I, is filled with events commemorating these valiant and heroic Americans.



Ten-year-old reenactor Geoffrey Tourovsky at the Sargeant York Museum - photos by Richard Frisbie

Finally the realization that "It all happened here!" woke me to the importance we (meaning Americans) had in this region, especially for the Great War, World War I.

Everywhere I went was historically connected to America's part in the war, and everyone I met had a story to connect them to the horrors that occurred during those long years of battle. Conversations about grape harvests, architecture, gastronomy, and even trees all led back to "The War".

What a majority of Americans know about World War I, if they know anything, does not have the immediacy of the knowledge of someone whose local church walls still have evidence of bullets and shrapnel damage, or whose village had to be

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I Met A Man Who Loved His Willows

The Champagne region of France is known for its baskets woven from willow branches. In fact, the French National School of Basket Weaving is located in Champagne.

So the next time you think of Champagne, think of baskets, not bubbly, and you'll win the admiration of Dominique Brochet-Lanvin.

Dominique Brochet-Lanvin, along with his wife, son, dog and a few rascally puppies, calls Botanique de la Presle home. It is their arboretum, nursery and labor of love in the French countryside outside of Epernay in Montagne de Reims.

Dominique is a salixophile, or lover of willows.

"There are 500 to 600 varieties of salix" he told me. "No one knows for sure. I'm trying to collect them all here."

When I told him that I only knew of the weeping willow, he said, "As we say in France, that is the one that hides the rest." Then he told me a charming story that is so typical of the French.

"Before he died, Napoleon requested that a weeping willow be planted on his grave. It became the custom for everyone who visited his tomb to take a cutting home to plant. His weeping willow spread around the world. Now, what he couldn't conquer in life he has dominion over through his millions of willows."

After the bread, the wine and now the willows, it is for stories like this that I love the French people.



Crabapple trees in bloom next to a picturesque little mill along the La Vesle river

Willows have many other uses. During World War I the French lined their trenches with woven willow panels to hold back the earthen ramparts.

Near St. Mihiel I actually got into some of the trenches. The German trenches were original, with walls and bunkers made from huge blocks of stone.

The French trenches were reconstructed with fresh willow walls, illustrating the impermanence of their battlements.

What they built for temporary protection from the barrage of enemy shells often became semi-permanent as the trench warfare dragged on for years. And all those years their willows kept them company.

Back in the arboretum Dominique walked me through his willow collection as a light rain fell. It

was perfect gardener's weather for admiring the various black, yellow, green, and contorted stems, each with their different size and shape catkins, or flowers.

Tall, short, multi- and single-trunk bushes and trees, all willows, competed for my attention. When I recognized the pussy willow, I realized that where I used to know only two types of willows, now I knew two hundred! And still the collection went on.

We toured over 1000 feet of perennial beds bordered with short woven willow fences before finishing our walk in the old fashioned rose garden.

Here Dominique showed me a prized specimen of the La Marne rose he and his wife rescued from extinction.

Originally named in 1915 for the Battle of La Marne, this blood-red beauty was nearly lost until they discovered a "forgotten" specimen in a relative's garden and propagated it.

Today, the Botanique de la Presle proudly sells descendants of this noble antique.

While the last French veteran of the Great War has been laid to rest, the La Marne rose lives on, a testament to the hardy French stock and the toils of two gardeners of Champagne.

I Met A Man Who Loved His Bread

M. Boizard is a lifelong baker who collected bread-related items as he baked his way into semi-retirement. Now, a new owner takes over his business while M. Boizard tends his collection, formally known as Musee du pain, but I think of it as the Bread Museum.

We met on a bridge near his home in Fismes, France. I'd stopped to photograph the crabapple trees in bloom next to a picturesque little mill along the La Vesle river.



Dominique Brochet-Lanvin at home in his garden Botanique de la Presle

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The willow-walled French trenches of the 1918 battlefield of Saillant in Saint-Mihiel

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