

Today

The Philadelphia Inquirer / September 22, 1974



AMERICAN GALLIC
The Mystery of Frenchville

Contents

Editors' Note: Albert Picard and his sister Elizabeth are among the last of the generations that preserved a unique heritage in America. The use of perfect French in Frenchville dates from the time more than 130 years ago when their ancestors traveled from France to the Pennsylvania hills to clear land and build shanties. The story begins on page 1. The photo is by Peter Simon.

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 1974

10

The Mystery of Frenchville

Every so often somebody discovers Frenchville, visits a while, then leaves. Each looks for his particular story. Each comes home puzzled. And Frenchville disappears again.

20

Shed a Tear for the Glories of Beer

We like to dream that the chubby, iron-willed brewmaster still stands guard, sipping each batch submitted to his critical judgment. It's only a dream.

26

Death of a Poet

Gil Orlovitz, the genius of Feltonville, hoped to write works that would give him his long-sought identity. After a panic-filled artistic struggle, he was buried as a pauper. The words he wanted to put into the world's mouth are still waiting for discovery.

34

The Man Who Fixes Phillies

Athletes don't talk about injuries. So, in silence, Don Seger bears the responsibility for collecting pieces of major league careers.

6

Serendipity

8

Interview / Bill Corsair

32

Crossword Puzzle Letters

38

Personalities, etc.

SCOTT DeGARMO
Editor

FRANK M. PONTARI
Art Director

ROBERT HOFBERG
Sales Manager,
Features

RICHARD CHEVERTON
Associate Editor

EARL E. DAVIS
Staff Artist

W.R. PLUMLEE
Associate Editor

SUSAN DAVIS FAUST
Office Manager

Contents of Today copyright 1974 by Philadelphia Newspapers, Inc. Published every Sunday at 400 N. Broad St., Philadelphia, Pa. 19101. Today welcomes manuscripts or photographs submitted on speculation, but assumes no responsibility for their loss, and will not return them unless accompanied by postage.

Pool industry prices now are nearly \$1000 more than last year!

How much longer can Anthony hold the line on pool prices?

Costs of construction materials and labor keep going up—month to month.

Anthony Pools, world's largest quantity buyer of pool materials, still has inventory of steel, cement, and pool equipment. We can hold prices as long as our supply lasts. No longer! Save money! Call at once for a free estimate.

Anthony is the only builder who actually manufactures a full line of pool equipment and accessories and provides unsurpassed future service from one source. Call Anthony today. Find out why over 100,000 pool buyers have selected Anthony Pools. This could save you dollars—and headaches!

WORLD'S LARGEST POOL BUILDER

ANTHONY POOLS FINANCING AVAILABLE
a Division of Anthony Industries, Inc., listed on the American Stock Exchange

PENNSYLVANIA • NEW JERSEY • DELAWARE • NEW YORK • VIRGINIA • MARYLAND • TEXAS • ARIZONA • CALIFORNIA

Call or write today... open seven days a week.

279-0800 • Pool Display Office • 16 E. Germantown Pike, Norristown, Pa. (215) 459-8950 • Brandywine Pool Display

• Beaver Valley Road and Route 202 South, Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania

428-3360 • 132 Barclay Center, Marlton Pike, Cherry Hill, New Jersey

242-1277 • Philadelphia, Pennsylvania • 924-1454 • Princeton, New Jersey

(302) 656-5693 • Wilmington, Delaware

AVOID PLANNING ERRORS — Send for free 32-page handbook. New edition shows latest in pool designs, equipment, and landscaping ideas. No obligation. Pj-2

Name _____ Address _____ City _____

State _____ Zip _____ Township _____ County _____ Phone No. _____

Mail coupon to ANTHONY POOLS, 2939 Felton Road, Norristown, PA 19403

The Mystery of Frenchville

*The professor could not believe his ears
when he spoke with the people in this hidden village.*

By SARA PITZER

The village of Frenchville in the mountains of central Pennsylvania is a little like Brigadoon. Every so often somebody discovers it, visits a while, then leaves, and Frenchville disappears again. Linguists, historians, sociologists, collectors of folklore and journalists have gone there. Each looks for his particular story. Each comes home puzzled.

The little village of 300 or so people hides in a pocket of hills in the

mountainous area of Clearfield County, slightly west of the center of the state. It is near no major city and no important landmark. Getting there from anywhere means traveling through the kind of country science fiction movie producers look for to film as prehistoric earth. The trip, over pitted blacktop roads, winds through areas of slag heaps left from played-out strip mines where nothing grows but a few evergreens. There are no people, no

homes, no litter. Eventually the road breaks through to signs of life. A blue roadmarker announces "The Village of Frenchville." The next thing travelers see is the graveyard dominated by a huge stone cross bearing a life-sized statue of Christ, which overlooks the town from the highest hill in the area. The cemetery seems symbolic, for much of what visitors look for in Frenchville is dying.

Frenchville once was rumored to

be a tough place where even the police did not go except in pairs. When sociologists went there in the early fifties to study a closed community there was a standing rule that women were not to go without men for protection. At least one game warden who drove into the area had to walk back out because his car's engine had been shot with a highpowered rifle.

But there was one outsider who had never heard the rumors. He



French is spoken, but seldom written, in Frenchville. The old markers in Saint Mary's Cemetery contain frequent errors and misspellings.

came in 1967. The man was dressed in a lumber jacket. He carried a tape recorder. Walking into the Frenchville post office he asked the postmistress, Jane Roussey, if she spoke French.

"Mais oui, certainement," she replied.

The outsider had found what he wanted—a place where he and his eight students could practice interviewing in French.

Without fully understanding that

the outsider was Simon Belasco, a linguistics professor from Penn State, and that his eight students were field researchers, Mrs. Roussey obligingly spoke with them in French.

It wasn't a pidgin French, but a classically pure French, uttered without a trace of English accent. And when the postmistress switched effortlessly into English—sometimes in mid-sentence—the words had no trace of French accent. Im-



Almost as through the mist of a dream, Route 879 leads into Frenchville.



Saint Mary's Church is another long-term landmark of the old settlement.



Albert Picard and his 100-year-old house, one of the oldest in the area.



When a team of linguists appeared at the Frenchville post office, it was greeted by a postmistress speaking perfect French.



Clyde Rogeaux and his grandson.



One establishment where the local French was spoken for years is this tavern operated by Donald and Louise Habovick.



Mrs. Emma Plubell in her yard.

FRENCHVILLE continued

possible. But as Belasco and his students recorded one villager after another the impossible became inescapably true. Most of the people could not read or write French. Even the inscriptions on some of the tombstones in the cemetery had misspellings and grammatical errors. Yet they spoke the language flawlessly. Somehow they had preserved it since the time over 130 years earlier when their ancestors

had walked overland from ports at Baltimore and New York into this mountainous region to clear the land and build shanties.

As far as anyone knows, the first settlers in 1830 walked all the way to this desolate spot because they had been seduced into buying land from John Keating, who circulated advertisements in France offering 12 free acres of land to the first dozen people to buy 50 acres apiece from him. Had they been able to read those circulars themselves and

understood where the land was, the deal might not have sounded so good.

No one is sure why they left France in the first place. Possibly it was to avoid conscription or the after-effects of the French Revolution. There are rumors too that Napoleon used the area to keep prisoners. But none of it is certain. Whatever happened, the world paid no attention.

In Frenchville, the isolated people farmed, mined, worked on near-

by railroads, and stuck together. When they spoke to each other they used French. When they could not avoid the outside world they talked a little English. As new inventions came along, the villagers, having no way of learning new French words for them, simply used the English words they knew—automobile, telephone, radio, television. It was a weird mixture, but aside from that the language remained pure for a long time.

Then the Frenchville children be-

The smart money
says...

NOW is the best time of the year to put in a Viking Pool.



If you build your Viking pool now you'll be in the swim as soon as the first warm day of Spring arrives. You won't lose a minute of fun and relaxation waiting for your pool to be finished.

Besides, construction costs keep going up. And prices are at their competitive best in the Fall — the off-season period. So start thinking about a Viking pool now. You'll be days and dollars ahead.

For two decades Viking has been custom designing and building the finest pools. If you're thinking of putting a pool in, you can't afford to settle for less. For full details about Viking work-free pools, call collect or mail the coupon today.

AQUATECH
MEMBER



MAIL THE COUPON OR CALL US COLLECT

VIKING AQUATECH POOLS, INC.

Subsidiary of Winslow Technology, Inc.

420 Swedeland Road, King of Prussia, Pa. 19406
(215) 279-0750

Please send me your fact-filled brochure on custom built Viking pools.

NAME _____

STREET _____

CITY _____ STATE _____

ZIP _____ PHONE _____



Peter Simon

In one of Frenchville's older homes are Mr. and Mrs. Clyde Rougeux and daughter Marian (in doorway at rear) with her husband Brian Anderson (far right) and their children, ages 6 to 16.

FRENCHVILLE continued

gan to feel ashamed of speaking French. When the little Frenchville school closed, forcing them to schools outside the community, the children were ridiculed for using French expressions.

As one woman recalled, "Everyone laughed at how I talked. I wanted to die. I decided right then that I didn't ever want to speak anything but English." Consequently, the fourth generation in Frenchville, those in their forties, generally understand but do not speak French. Younger people neither speak nor understand the language. As the older generations die, the language dies with them.

Belasco realized it, and tried to get as much of it on tape as possible. One of the people he directed in the task was Madame Josette Caujolle, one of the eight students who made the original trip with him. Madame Caujolle is French and decided to make Frenchville the subject of her doctoral dissertation. She was more popular than any of the other researchers in Frenchville. She explains, "When I spoke to them in French and could talk about France, the people just opened up." As she collected tapes over a period of months she had her own sad reminder of how fast the language is disappearing. She returned to the home of an older man who had loved speaking French with her, greeting him enthusiastically, asking about his health, his friends, and his French. He said nothing. He stood before her, with tears running down his face, while a relative explained to her that the man had recently had a tracheotomy and could not speak.

Another place Madame Caujolle heard French spoken was Habovick's tavern. They still remember her there. Andrew Habovick, a tall, smooth-faced man in his forties or fifties, who owns the tavern, says, yes, he speaks French, but he does

not volunteer to do so today.

"That woman, the French one, she was going to take the tapes of our voices and go to France where our ancestors come from and tape people there saying the same things," he says. An old man wearing a red cap nods agreement. "And then she was going to bring the tapes from France back here for us to hear. We haven't seen her yet."

The old man nods again, to no one in particular and lights a cigaret. His name is A.J. Picard, he says, and it is important to get the "A.J." right, otherwise he'll be mixed up with some other Picards in town.

Andrew Habovick and A.J. Picard explain that the younger generation doesn't speak French now because they were punished for it, sometimes by having their knuckles rapped with a ruler, in school. A.J., having never suffered such punishment himself, goes ahead and cracks a few jokes in French about "la jeune fille" and the others in the bar laugh and turn to see that "the young girl" is obviously not very "jeune."

Madame Caujolle, in her university office, explains that first generation settlers spoke only French. Successive generations were fluent in both languages until, in recent years, outside pressures took the pleasure out of speaking French.

It is possible, too, that the original settlers had a rural dialect typical of the Haute Marne region of France from which they came but that the dialect was "purified" by contact with the first priests and nuns in Frenchville who would have spoken the more educated standard French. Villagers talking together could have picked up and passed along the refinements. Madame Caujolle may find a clue to that when she goes to France to record speech from the area from which the first Frenchville settlers emigrated, but it will be a year or more

to page 16

SPECIALIZING IN FASHIONS FOR BIG, BEAUTIFUL WOMEN

LANE BRYANT

special sizes 18½ to 28½ and 38 to 48

PANTS SET FOR PARTYING

\$16

Our fabulous print two-piece that has the look of three parts. Back-zipped toga top and straight-cut pants in acetate surah, printed on blue, gold, rose or green.



CHESTNUT at 12th • PHILA., PA. 19107 LO 4-4200
CHERRY HILL, TRENTON, OXFORD VALLEY, ARDMORE
Add \$1 for C.O.D.

CAN YOU QUIT SMOKING? READ THE EVIDENCE

**Bantron No. 1 in Sales! In Clinical Tests
it worked for 4 out of 5!**

In the past twenty years thousands of people all over the world have stopped smoking with the aid of Bantron®. In actual clinical tests among smokers who wanted to quit, more than 4 out of 5 did so easily and pleasantly with its help. Meanwhile less effective smoking deterrents have disappeared from the drug store. If you have been dis-

appointed by one of these, do not let this keep you from trying Bantron. Bantron's long record of success is your assurance that it can help you. Bantron is not habit-forming and does not affect the taste in any way. It works by acting as a substitute for the nicotine in your system. Get it at any drug store without a prescription.

FRENCHVILLE continued

before she is able to do so. In the meantime, Andrew Habovick and many others in Frenchville know that there is something puzzling about their French. They always knew what researchers are just learning—that the puzzle has something to do with the closeness that grows in a group in isolation.

Edith Voinchet, a 67-year-old widow who filled many tapes for researchers, remembers the isolation and the closeness. In winter, when snow kept people from going anywhere, they often sat in each other's homes, gossiping in French. Her home would surely have been one of the liveliest places to gather.

Her house is protected by nearly a score of barking dogs and puppies and at first it seems that the old legends of strangers being unwelcome in Frenchville are true. Then Mrs. Voinchet opens the door, whisking a scarf from her hair, and before she knows who her visitors are, she begins feeding them coffee and homemade raisin cookies.

She pours herself coffee, apologizing that it is instant, lights a cigarette, and sits down to talk. The cigarette seems as out of place in her hand as do the gleaming electric appliances in her hundred-year-old kitchen.

"I only went to eighth grade. I got all my knowledge at that little one-room school down there," she says, pointing toward a tiny brick building at the bottom of the hill. The sophistication of her English vocabulary makes the information surprising.

Asked if she still speaks French, Mrs. Voinchet bursts into a throaty flood of words ending with, "Oui, je parle le Francais. Do you speak French?"

If she is disappointed to be told "un peu," a little, she is too friendly to show it, and, except for a song or two which she sings in French contralto, she tells the rest of her stories in perfect English.

Edie Voinchet tells about the music and the dancing in the old days. Her family was musical; her father was given a violin by the nuns; his daughter played accordion, piano, and organ. The family played somewhere almost every weekend. Young men would walk ten miles to attend a dance where the Voinchets played but the attraction may have been more Edie than her music. "I was a devil when I was young, a real devil," she says.

"The barn raisings were wonderful. They'd build a barn and after it was done they'd have a dance in it. We played for all the barn raisings."

Edie remembers that when the



Edith Voinchet and Good Friday egg—keeps lightning from striking house

nuns left the convent in Frenchville because the people could not support them adequately, the convent was used as a dance hall.

The biggest dance of the year was on Shrove Tuesday, the last day before Lent. In French it was called "Carnival." Playing before penance, the people of Frenchville danced so hard that the floor in the old convent groaned and sagged. Eventually the building was condemned—unfit for crowds.

Carnival was just for fun. Barn raisings and barn dances were a way of getting work done and having fun as well. Frenchville folks see playing at work as a tradition.

One villager who remembers such cooperative activities vividly is Gertrude Picard. She and her husband Earl (brother of A.J.) live directly across from the post office in an impeccably tidy, traditional-looking white house. Mrs. Picard remembers the apple peeling parties best.

"We'd get together, the whole town, and we'd be up all night peeling apples. Of course we'd be chattering and singing in French the whole time. They would serve a midnight lunch and then toward morning there would be another lunch." After peeling, the apples cooked outside in iron kettles for two days to make applebutter.

"Nowadays applebutter comes in a jar at the store," Mrs. Picard says, but she does not seem particularly sorry that this is so.

The one Frenchville festivity that included everyone, was famous even among outsiders, and goes on even today, is the Frenchville Picnic. No one knows quite when the custom began but all agree it's been going on "practically forever." It's a July

continued on page 18

FRENCHVILLE continued

day of games and contests and eating. People who have moved away travel hundreds of miles to return home for Picnic. Along with the potato salad and homemade bread, the relishes and beans, the cakes and pies and cookies, there are three-legged races and relay sprints for the children. Later, when most of the food is gone, the teenagers may slip to the outer edges of the picnic grounds to hold hands and flirt. The younger children race about in spontaneous games of hide and seek and tag, the men pitch horseshoes while the women gossip with relatives who've been away since last year. A few oldtimers play Piquet, a French card game.

In earlier days, gangs of boys from neighboring villages would sneak up to the picnic late in the day to tease the Frenchville boys into

fight that were noisy but otherwise not very serious. It was probably that kind of prank which contributed to the village's reputation for rowdiness.

In truth, the toughness outsiders expect in Frenchville has been gone for a long time. It never was unique to Frenchville. In the 1920s and 1930s, most of the little villages in the mountains had a share of suspicious, inhospitable folks. There was winemaking in Frenchville, some say, and probably the rumors of stills deep in the woods were true. Frenchville men worked on the New York Central Railroad, which ran through the area, along with groups of Italians from Clearfield and mulattos from Karthaus. Sometimes they fought. In Frenchville, when the stories of fights are told, it is of how the Frenchville men always won. Every little town has similar stories.

The story about a young Frenchville man today is less apt to be about his fights than about his comic adventures. For example, there is the story about the youth who went to Clearfield and sat on the curb at the main intersection of town, eating peanuts and building at his feet a mound of shells high enough to attract attention. When a policeman asked him to stop because he was creating a hazard by distracting drivers, he refused. He was taken to the police station where he paid his fine then stomped out shouting that Frenchville boys couldn't even eat peanuts in Clearfield.

Even without the fights and feuds, Frenchville is an unusual place. People are friendly. Strangers are treated like family and families treat each other with an affection and concern that is rare in the world beyond this mountain village. One wonders how much longer it can

last. Linguists, sociologists, historians, and journalists agree that they are recording the death of a culture. It has been over a century but the world has gotten to Frenchville.

Automobiles brought a few visitors in. An interstate highway completed in 1970 has taken many people out. The children now go to schools in towns where French is taught from textbooks by teachers with bad accents: *La plume de ma tante est sur la bureau*. The parents who could have taught their children good French were ashamed of "talking funny," so the old people die and take their pure French and old customs to the grave. Television replaces song-fests; mobile homes replace barn-raising. The old stone church has new glass doors. Apple-butter comes in glass jars. □

SARA PITZER is a Rebersburg, Pa., freelance writer.