

## Living French Traditions of the Middle Mississippi Valley

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**N**o Post-Mortem please.

As it is most often told, the saga of French culture in the Mid-Continent is a colorful and compelling story of explorers, Indian princesses, *voyageurs*, fur traders, and frontier entrepreneurs. But the story generally stops abruptly around 1830. What happened to the descendants of local French colonials? Were they "run-off," as were American Indians? Did they suffer extinction, as did the passenger pigeons? Did they just "melt" and "blend" with subsequent groups of settlers into one undifferentiated American "soup"?

Of course not. A wide range of French traditions continue to be practiced in Missouri and Illinois today. And yet, our lopsided, past-oriented view of French culture tends to deny local French people a modern history and a current existence. Our tendency to relegate the French to history affects scholars, students, tourists, and, of course, living French people as well. The following excerpt from my recent field notes illustrates the problem: January 10, 1993

By the time I reached the French Village general store I was ready for a short rest. I parked my truck and photographed the store's sign. It was brightly painted orange with white letters and decorated with a prominent fleur-de-lis. Much of the merchandise in the store catered to sportsmen, especially hunters and fishermen. A uniformed game warden, a man who appeared to be in his late thirties, was standing to the side of the counter.



*La Guignolée Singers, from Ste. Genevieve, Missouri, ca. 1900*

The cashier was a woman who seemed about the same age as the game warden.

After looking around some, I walked up to the counter and asked the cashier, "Are there many French people who live around here in French Village?" She immediately responded, "All the French people are buried up the hill behind the Catholic church." Upon hearing this, the game warden strode quickly to the counter and said, "Hey, what are you talking about!! Don't forget I am a Gouverneur!" The cashier, realizing her error, added, "Well, I mean all of the old-timers—the early French settlers—are buried behind the church."

*La Guillonée*, the famous French New Year's Eve custom, has not been immune to this tendency to historicize or "bury" French culture. As traditionally practiced in the Mississippi Valley, *La Guillonée* (there is no standard spelling of this word) involves a costumed group of revelers who go house to house throughout the neighborhood, chanting the ancient *Guillonée* song (lyrics of the *Guillonée* are provided on page 11). In January 1867, at the first meeting of the newly formed Missouri Historical Society, Wilson Primm (1810-78) offered a lecture entitled "New Year's Day in the

Olden Time of St. Louis." Before his audience, the cultured elite of St. Louis, Primm romanticized the "Old Creoles of pure and truthful character" and eulogized *La Guillonée* as though it were a quaint custom once practiced by a noble but past people.

Primm's historical romanticizing of those "quaint and peculiar" French folk and their customs can too easily be

traced from his time to the present. Harry J. Petrequin followed suit around 1935 when he published a tourist pamphlet for Ste. Genevieve. Typifying the romantic, past-oriented rhetoric often used in connection with *La Guillonée*, the author writes:

Let us, in fancy, journey back to the early days of Old Ste. Genevieve. This early custom illustrates the democratic attitude of its inhabitants. The distinction of wealth was unknown. The door of the richest stood open to the poorest at this ceremony.

There is no doubt that *La Guillonée* is a ritual of great antiquity. This custom has ancient Celtic origins, and it belongs to a paradigm of European and European American mumming rituals that includes *La Chandeleur*, practiced in the French Canadian Maritimes; *Mardi Gras*, as practiced in rural southwest Louisiana; the Scottish *Hogmanay*; the Spanish *Agillandó*; and various carnival fêtes of the Caribbean. Its history, evolution, and geographic diffusion richly deserve our attention.

But *La Guillonée* is more than a historical artifact—it continues to be performed in Missouri and Illinois today. It has remained current for over

125 years after Wilson Primm eloquently "buried" it with his gilded description of Creole St. Louis. *Guillonée* groups in Ste. Genevieve, French Village, Bloomsdale, and Old Mines in Missouri; Prairie du Rocher and Cahokia in Illinois; and Vincennes in Indiana remained active at least until after World War I. The Prairie du Rocher group continued the *Guillonée* uninterrupted, and by 1977 the Ste. Genevieve, Old Mines and Cahokia groups had revived the celebration, with their peculiar local traditions intact.

Today, in Prairie du Rocher and Ste. Genevieve, the *Guillonée*, takes the form of a popular New Year's Eve run. In Cahokia, the ritual has been revived as part of the annual *La Gui-année* Ball, sponsored by the Cahokia Junior Women's Club. In the Old Mines area, though performance has not occurred in the context of New Year's Eve for the past several years, a band of very capable *Guillonée* performers can easily be assembled.

The popularity of this custom fluctuates, with some generations more enthusiastic about it than others. And, true to its folk character, considerable variation in performance has developed from one village to the next. Nevertheless, after three hundred years of French history in the Mid-Mississippi Valley, *La Guillonée* carries forth as a living symbol of group identity and tradition.

At this year's Heritage Fair we have the unusual treat of performances by four *Guillonée* groups: two from Missouri—Ste. Genevieve and Old Mines—and two from Illinois—Prairie du Rocher and Cahokia. Such a concord of *Guillonée* performers has not taken place since November 5, 1977, when folklorist Barry Bergey, then working with the Missouri Friends of the Folk Arts, recorded a similar gathering at the Pierre Menard House in Prairie de Rocher, Illinois.

#### French Traditions Run in the Family

The great Missouri French fiddler Charlie Pashia, born in 1910, lives in a log house built around 1846 on Old Mines Concession property bought by his maternal great-great-grandfather, Antoine Decelle Duclos II. Charlie and his wife, Mary Alice Coleman Pashia, reared fourteen children in this house. Now when their eighteen or so great-grandchildren come to the log house, they are in an active dwelling once inhabited by their great-great-great-great-great-grandfather. And that is just half of the story. Charlie Pashia's great-great-great-great grandfather, Antoine Decelle Duclos I (b. 1743), a military officer of France at Fort Chartres, had one grandmother named Marie Rouensa (d. 1725), who was the daughter of a Kaskaskia Indian chief, and another grandmother who was first cousin to the Lémoyne brothers, Iberville and Bienville!

This slice of Mr. Pashia's family story is revealing in a number of ways. Beginning with the obvious, we should now feel confident that those great (and not-so-great) characters of French American history did not become extinct—at least not without giving issue to long lines of French descendants. In fact, Charlie's genealogy typifies Mid-Mississippi Valley French lineages. From relatively few original progenitors, with relatively few French surnames, sprang many generations of large Catholic families. Local French people thus tend to be related to one another—and to Charlie, for that matter—on one side or the other if not both.

And, as in Charlie Pashia's case, it is not unusual to find French families in Missouri and Illinois living on or near property held in the same family for many generations. As a result, communities and neighborhoods tend to be made up of large, close-knit, nuclear and extended families. Marriage partners are often chosen from within the group. Where Catholic

French populations have been surrounded by English-speaking Protestants, as in Washington County, Missouri, endogamy (in-group marriage) has been very strong. Thus, the typical French family shares genealogical ties and/or marriage alliances with its neighbors, as well as long relationships with surrounding natural and built environments.

Cultural traits in general, and especially ethnic traditions, pass from one generation to the next most efficaciously through the family. This process has certainly affected the continuity of *La Guillonée*. Fiddler and soloist Bill Clerc, for example, a respected pillar of the Prairie du Rocher *Guillonée*, is a younger brother of the late Arthur Percy Clerc, who was the group's longtime song leader before his death in 1981. Percy, who inherited his leadership role from his father, Charles Clerc, had been famous for, among other things, his cornshuck costume, which he made around 1952 following his grandmother's instructions. Percy Clerc's version of the *Guillonée* song remains currently in use in Prairie du Rocher.

The family also plays a principal role in the persistence of French foodways. For example, Cyrilla Boyer, of Racola, Missouri, is the keeper of the Boyer family recipe for *croxignoles*, holeless French doughnuts. Ms. Boyer learned the recipe from her grandmother, Elizabeth Duclos Boyer. She claims that the only way for a stranger to get the recipe is to marry into the family. And, since there is little chance of a Boyer marrying a stranger anyway, the recipe seems well protected. With luck, one may nevertheless sample Cyrilla Boyer's *croxignoles* at this year's Heritage Fair.

Within the memory of many local French people, *la boucherie*, the slaughter of livestock, usually hogs, was a necessary part of family and community subsistence. The family *boucherie* is still practiced, though less

frequently since the advent of "quick food." Some local products of the butchery continue to be popular among those whose palates have been traditionally conditioned—the pre-McDonald's generation, for instance. These include: *boudin*, or *boudin noir*, a blood sausage stuffed in *des tripes* (natural casings); *andouilles*, the large hog intestines cleaned and stuffed with ground pork; *ponce*, stuffed pork stomachs; *tête fromage*, hog's head cheese; and *gratons*, or *gortons*, as locally pronounced, fried pieces of pork fatback. Eli Robart of Old Mines will prepare *les goitons* for visitors of the 1993 Heritage Fair.

These pork dishes represent ancient French food customs, and they are also prepared among contemporary French populations in Louisiana, Quebec, the Canadian Maritimes, and New England. However, Mid-Mississippi Valley recipes offer regional distinctiveness in preparation and seasoning. For example, while Louisiana *boudin noir* is the only blood sausage containing rice, Illinois French butchers have the only *boudin* that includes cabbage. Could this recipe have something to do with the pervasive German culture of western Illinois?

Another ancient food custom featured at the Heritage Fair involves hominy, or *du gru*. Hominy had its origin among Native Americans but has been important to French people since they first came to the Mississippi Valley. A number of informants told of how they once made hominy by applying ashes to the white grains of hickory cane, a favorite local corn variety. Today, hominy is only found in grocery store cans—except in the Old Mines area, where dried hominy chops are available by the pound at a local tavern. While hominy is not unique to French Missouri, the Old Mines recipe for cooking hominy with beans (often white beans) is a local development.

*Bouillon*, a soup made with chicken and eaten with crackers and pickles, is another significant local French communal food custom. *Bouillon* is also a social event. Christmas or Mardi Gras often call for a *bouillon*, but one may occur any time. On several occasions I have been informed that a good *bouillon* can only be made from a chicken stolen from a neighbor. It is important that the wronged party attend the *bouillon* and find it to be the best ever tasted! Bernadette Bequette and her sister, Christine Bequette Daugherty, of the Old Mines area, are experts at rounding up chickens, and they will prepare the *bouillon* at this year's Heritage Fair.

Card playing is a frequent pastime when family and neighbors gather, and the most popular local game is *euchre*. *Euchre* is not only played at home but at taverns, where weekly tournaments are common. Though the origin of this ancient game is unknown, it may have been brought to North America by French colonists. The rules resemble the card game *écarté*, played in France, as well as the popular French Louisiana game *bourré*. The goal of these three card games, all of which are played with five-card hands and changing trump suits, is to take at least three tricks while prohibiting adversaries from taking any. Since *euchre* is such a popular pastime in French communities, the game will be featured among other French traditions at the Heritage Fair.

Travelers' accounts of French Missouri rarely failed to mention the locals' great passion for music and dance. In Ste. Genevieve in 1808, Thomas Ashe noted that in the evening "nearly every house has a group, and nearly every group has a guitar, fiddle, storyteller, or singer." These traditions carry forth in various modified forms today.

Lloyd LaLumondier, a highly respected dance fiddler from Festus, Missouri, will be featured at the

Heritage Fair. Lloyd's father, Albert LaLumondier was the lead singer of the Bloomsdale *Guillonée* in 1949, when Elmer Donze, owner of KSGM radio station in Ste. Genevieve, recorded the group and produced their song on a 78 rpm disc (the Prairie du Rocher singers were on the flip side). Lloyd plays an excellent version of the tune on his fiddle, and he will be around to accompany *La Guillonée* performances at the Heritage Fair.

Mr. LaLumondier's band, which includes his wife Georgina on guitar, will also play old-time dance tunes for a group of Washington County, Missouri, square dancers, led by Ray Thebeau. Based in Potosi, these dancers perform a mixture of older local square patterns and more recent popular western squares. It is difficult to determine the degree of influence that French fiddling and dance has had upon contemporary old-time music and dance repertoires. French musicians and dancers have participated in and made contributions to whatever musical trends affected their communities—and they remain engaged in this dynamic process.

French storytelling is a rich and well-documented genre of folklore in the Mid-Mississippi Valley. A large body of oral literature was collected from Old Mines-area storytellers during the 1930s by Professor Joseph Médard Carrière. Pierre (Pete) Boyer, originally from Racola, Missouri, now a resident of Potosi, grew up listening to these ancient *contes* depicting heroes, kings, and mythical creatures. As a young man in his twenties, Boyer guided Professor Carrière to his best informants. Today, Mr. Boyer is now one the last remaining raconteurs of these tales.

Another category of stories includes tall tales, whoppers, and humorous "true-life" accounts. The storyteller working with this sort of material is apt to mingle past and present, fiction and non-fiction, within the same stories. Clifford Benedict

"Benny" Thebeau of Racola, Missouri, is such a storyteller, but he assures us that "the truth is funnier than lies." Both he and Pierre Boyer will be featured as storytellers at this year's Heritage Fair.

Benny Thebeau will also demonstrate his work as a stone mason. Like most French people from the Old Mines area, Benny Thebeau's ancestors were hard-rock miners who worked with hand tools. Traditional skills for hand-mining lead and tiff have passed down through many generations in this community. Benny's grandfather also developed skills in preparing limestone blocks for foundations and walls. Benny Thebeau inherited these skills, and he will demonstrate how to part limestone into blocks of predictable size and how to face rock to be used in construction.

French residents of the Mid-Mississippi Valley are predominantly Catholic. The sacraments, weekly Mass, seasonal ceremonies, and celebrations of the Catholic calendar lend structure to community life. Individual religious faith also finds expression in many ways. Religious statues, especially those of the Madonna, adorn front porches and yards. The statues occasionally stand alone but more often preside over other religious and secular objects. Many of the Madonnas occupy porcelain grottos created from upturned and partially buried early twentieth century bathtubs.

Inside homes, religious expression appears in many forms. Home altars typically consist of the combination of older and more contemporary religious articles: crucifixes, madonnas, statues of patron saints, holy cards, holy water vessels, and votive candles. These religious objects are often intermixed with several generations of family photographs, gifts from family members, and keepsakes of all types.

Blessed palm, received annually on Palm Sunday, is displayed throughout

the house. In west-central France, French Louisiana, French New England, French Canada, and in the French communities of the Mid-Mississippi Valley, residents burn blessed palm during periods of severe weather in the belief that it will help protect their homes from danger. This blessed palm is sometimes braided into decorative ornaments that are placed above door frames and elsewhere in the home. Monica Pashia, of Racola, daughter of Old Mines *Guillonée* song leader, Anna Robart Pashia, demonstrates the local custom of braiding palm.

#### Whither French Traditions?

Those who attend the 1993 Heritage Fair will have a firsthand encounter with living French heritage. Thanks to the Missouri Historical Society, traditional performers from French communities in Illinois and Missouri will have the opportunity to celebrate and validate their cultural identity. Like Mr. Govereau, the French Village game warden, these people are not ready to bury their Frenchness in the cemetery up the hill behind the Catholic church.

And yet, French people of the Mid-Mississippi Valley have more or less accommodated, as all peoples of this region have, to contemporary twentieth-century life. For a French group residing in the heart of the world's largest and most modern English-speaking country, they have succeeded marvelously in maintaining their identity. Some have prospered and enjoy leadership roles in their communities. Others, finding it more difficult to adapt to changing times, suffer in poverty and unemployment. All face the challenges of a deteriorating industrial environment.

The French language has not fared well. It has been all but purged by the official policies of our monolingual English educational system and our English-only media. French speakers

who were around earlier this century were made to feel ashamed of their mother tongue. Some were punished in school for speaking French, and some, feeling stigmatized by their different language and customs, rejected their heritage. Along with language loss comes the consequent loss of large bodies of oral tradition and folk wisdom. These are the realities of the postmodern world.

And yet, the maintenance of individual and group identity, as well as the creation of folk art, is a matter of choice. So what if *La Guillonée* is now increasingly sung by performers who have decreasing competencies in the language of its French verse? *La Guillonée* can, and does, continue to function as a symbolic mechanism through which French heritage is transmitted and French identity annually renewed. So long as individuals in groups choose to practice their inherited French culture, the chapter on Mid-Mississippi French history need never conclude.