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A French Re-connection



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Gloria Freeland

Introduction

Every semester, I assign my Kansas State University journalism students the task of writing news stories about historical topics. I never imagined the spring 2013 project would lead to the people of Morganville, Kansas and Fèves, France to reconnect after 65 years.

In 2012, I heard about the “lost Kansas communities” project of K-State’s Chapman Center for Rural Studies. The goal of the project is to preserve the history of small rural communities in the state. So I divided my two classes into 10 teams of three or four students, with each team taking one community in nearby Clay County. They went through records, newspaper clippings, photos and books at the Clay County Museum, interviewed people and visited the community sites.

The Clay Center Dispatch was interested in publishing the stories, which required fact-checking. I recruited my hus-

band, Art Vaughan, who has done extensive genealogical research, to make certain the work my fledgling reporters had done was accurate. While the two of us have done this sort of thing for a long time and we both are persistent, I would describe him as “dogged.”

All my students’ stories were interesting, but one stood out - the one about Morganville, Kansas.

The Morganville-Fèves Connection

In 1947, Morganville, population 280, wanted to help the people devastated by World War II. Some of the area’s young men had been in Gen. George Patton’s “Iron Men of Metz” 95th Infantry Division. They had seen the damage done by our own troops to surrounding communities while capturing Metz. So Morganville decided to adopt Fèves, a small farming and wine-producing village six miles northwest of Metz.



Jubilant Morganville, Kansas residents performed in the 1948 pageant, “Message to Fèves,” to raise money for the small French village devastated by World War II. (Photo courtesy Clay County Museum)

To help raise money for Fèves, the people of Morganville came up with the idea of producing a pageant, complete with an original play. It was called "Message to Fèves." The 4,500 word script was written in two weeks by resident Velma Carson to the meter of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Song of Hiawatha." In it, she described what the area was like before the first white settlers arrived, what animals once lived there and how things changed as settlers arrived, bringing their cultures and talents from diverse places. She wanted the citizens of Fèves to know the people of Morganville were not rich and that its citizens had experienced tornadoes, floods, droughts and grasshopper infestations. Her message to the French people was, just as they had endured, so, too, would the people of Fèves.

By the afternoon of Aug. 27, 1948, the windows of Morganville businesses were decorated with U.S. and French flags. Main Street was draped in flags of all the nations made from rags local women had dyed. Bingo, penny pitching and horse rides, as well as the sale of ice cream, cookies, popcorn and turkey dinners were some of the ways money was raised.

The play began at 8 p.m. in a stone amphitheater where an old mercantile had once stood. No admission was charged, but donations were welcomed. About 150 of Morganville's residents participated in the play and another 50 helped with other activities.

Nearly 1,000 people came. The receipts totaled about \$1,000 - \$10,000 in today's currency. People also donated good shoes, clothing and blankets.

The money from the pageant and from subsequent fundraising projects purchased food, seeds and other items that were sent to France. An audio recording of the play was broadcast to Europe by station WRUL in Boston and later rebroadcast with a narration in French by Radio Nancy in France.

Fèves schoolmaster Henri Torlotting was a key person involved in the distribution of the items that began arriving at the end of 1948. Over the months and years that followed, Fèves recovered, with the help of the materials provided by Morganville, the Marshall Plan and the efforts of its own resilient citizens.



Henri and Mathilde Torlotting, with their nephew Gérard Torlotting, age 7. Gérard, now in his early 70s, and his wife Solange remember when the gifts from Morganville first began arriving in Fèves. (Photo courtesy Clay County Museum)

On June 23, 1949, area officials from across Lorraine as well as the school children from Fèves recorded a "thank you" program for the people of Morganville.

In 1949, Elmore McKee, a minister with a national reputation, was looking for examples of how people working on their own without the help of government agencies could change the world. The Morganville story was one

of 13 half-hour radio programs he produced. The Morganville program was called "A Prairie Noel" and was broadcast nationally on the NBC radio network two days before Christmas in 1950. The Armed Forces Radio Service carried the program to U.S. troops. The series was called "The People Act."

It was so popular that McKee was asked to do many more over the following years. In 1955, he published a book, also called "The People Act," that contained selected stories. Chapter 7, "One Affirmative Thing for Peace," is the story of how Methodist minister Henry Millikan and Velma

Carson motivated Morganville to help Fèves.

Over time, this small French village became more to Morganville than just a place to send aid ... it became a sister city.

Milton Eisenhower, president of what was then called Kansas State Agricultural College (and what later became Kansas State University) and brother of President Dwight Eisenhower, believed strongly in these people-to-people arrangements. Milton's influence led directly to the president creating Sister Cities International in 1956.

Early in the friendship that developed between the villages, plans were set in motion to have Schoolmaster Torlotting and his wife Mathilde visit Morganville. Over time, several citizens of Morganville were able to visit their sister city. But money was tight in post-war France and no one from Fèves ever visited their sister on the Kansas prairie.

The towns Reconnect

That is, not until 2013, 65 years after the pageant was performed. When Art read my students' story about Morganville's pageant, he wondered whether anyone in Fèves remembered that a small town in Kansas had helped them so many years ago. He started searching the Internet for information about Fèves.

At first, the search only yielded information and recipes about beans as fève means "bean" in French.

But he finally found a website for the French village. On it were a few photos that he recognized as being from Morganville. He wrote to the email address on the site. He doesn't read or write French, so his inquiry was in English. No answer.

Another email.

Again, no answer.

But after the third, he

received a response from Hervé Torlotting, a great nephew of Schoolmaster Henri Torlotting. While Hervé and family live in the United States, they were visiting his parents in Fèves at the time Art's email arrived. Hervé's father Gérard and mother Solange were children when the aid from Morganville arrived, and they remember when the gifts came. Gérard still has the blanket he was given. It now helps protect his John Deere lawn mower in a shed outside his home.

That Christmas, Gérard and Solange were visiting their son and his family. They decided it was time for someone from Fèves to visit Morganville. They, son Hervé, daughter-in-law Christine and grandchildren Paul and Emma drove to Kansas on Dec. 28, 2013. The following day, they attended a reception in their honor at the old elementary school gym in Morganville, where the people greeted them with open arms and warm hearts. Tables were decorated with small French and U.S. flags anchored in jars filled with wheat, soybeans and corn. A large French flag flew outside the old school. Gérard and Morganville Mayor Brent Rundell made comments and exchanged gifts from their towns. Art showed a DVD explaining the history of their towns' relationship.

Recent Visitors to Fèves

Although it had been awhile since any Kansans visited Fèves, Art, our daughters Mariya and Katherine, the girls' second cousins Ryan and Hannah Serwe, and I visited the

French village in May 2014. We presented gifts to them from Morganville's citizens.

Art, Katherine and I visited again in spring 2015, when the people of Fèves had a barbecue to raise funds for a group of them to visit their sister in Kansas.

Visitors to Morganville and Clay Center

Twenty citizens from Fèves visited Manhattan, Morganville and Clay Center on Thursday, Sept. 10, 2015.



On Sept. 10, 2015, a group of 20 Fèves citizens visited Manhattan, Morganville and Clay Center. Here they are in the Morganville amphitheater where the 1948 pageant was performed. (Photo Gloria Freeland)

Provost April Mason and Birgit Wassmuth, director of the A.Q. Miller School of Journalism and Mass Communications, greeted them on the K-State campus.

We traveled by bus to Morganville, stopping along the way so they could check out milo and soybean fields. They also rode a local farmer's combine and tractor and visited the Morganville grain elevator.

They were guests of honor at a luncheon provided by the Morganville Café. Centerpieces on each table featured real sunflowers flanked by small French and U.S. flags, while a large French flag flew outside the café.

During the program, Gérard Torlotting and Brent Rundell spoke of their towns' friendship. Among the Fèves citizens was Roger Wechtler, who presented a sign to the people of Morganville - a sign that gave the distance - in kilometers and miles - between the two villages.

The next stop was the Clay Center Community High School, where students who had been practicing their French gave the visitors a tour of the building. Three students did a five-minute reading of Velma Carson's "Message to Fèves" script.

Conclusion

Most school assignments are designed for students to learn new skills, practice thinking in a new way or become familiar with new facts or ideas. They only occasionally have an impact on anyone not directly involved in the class.

But this one did and it led to the re-connection of long-separated "sisters." Perhaps bolstered by 21st century communications tools such as email and Facebook, they will now remain in touch.



On Sept. 10, 2015, Roger Wechtler of Fèves presented a road sign indicating the mileage from his town to Morganville to Brent Rundell, mayor of Morganville. (Photo Gloria Freeland)

References:

Clay Center Dispatch

Clay County Museum

McKee, Elmore, "One Affirmative Thing for Peace," in *The People Act: Stories of How Americans are Coming Together to Deal with Their Community Problems*, 1955

Website: www.villagedefeves.fr/

Website: www.morganvillefeves.org, compiled by Arthur R. Vaughan from sources including the Clay Center Dispatch and the Morganville Tribune, the Clay County Museum, the Fèves website, Elmore McKee's book, donated photos, papers and letters from Velma Carson's materials and others listed on the site

Author information

Gloria Freeland, Kansas State University assistant professor of journalism and mass communications, was born in Marion County, Kansas. She received her B.A. degree in journalism and mass communications and her M.B.A., both from K-State. She was a Peace Corps volunteer in Ecuador and she worked on a twice-weekly English-language newspaper in Costa Rica. She also worked on several Kansas weeklies. Freeland writes a weekly blog, "Kansas Snapshots" [www.kansasnapshots.com] and she's a board member of the Riley County Historical Society.