

OLD FRIENDS



Courtesy photos

Pageant participants perform a Hawaiian dance scene during the One World Peace Festival in Morganville in 1948. The pageant was organized as a part of an effort to adopt Fèves — a small French town that was decimated during World War II — as its sister town.

Morganville reconnects with French town it helped during WWII

Bryan Richardson
brichardson@themercury.com

To paraphrase one line from a very famous song: “You’ll want to be in that number... when the French go marching in.”

A meeting 65 years in the making will take place when Gérard Torlotting visits the Clay County community of Morganville on Dec. 29, accompanied by his wife, son, daughter-in-law and two grandchildren.

Torlotting is traveling from Fèves, a village in northeastern France that residents of Morganville helped through a charity pageant after World War II.

Torlotting’s uncle, Fèves schoolmaster Henri Torlotting, helped distribute the items when they arrived from Morganville — following the charity event on Aug. 27, 1948.

Back to the present: The family will arrive in Manhattan on Dec. 28 and travel to Morganville for a reception at 2 p.m. Dec. 29 at the Morganville Elementary school gym.

Morganville, which now has 192 residents, is about an hour away from Manhattan.

Nancy Johnson of Morganville has been organizing the event.

“We’re asking the people who were in the pageant or those who had parents in the pageant to come in,” she said.

While Johnson didn’t have a chance to experience the pageant — she moved to town in 1951 — she said she has always been interested in Morganville history.

“It’s exciting for the older people who remember it, and there are very few because many were in high school at the time,” she said. “Many have already died.”

AFTER THE war, nearly 200 American towns adopted sister cities as a part of “Operation Democracy,” a program created in Locust Valley, N.Y., to help Europe recover from years of battles and occupation.

Morganville was the smallest town involved.

It made sense that Morganville would select Fèves, considering their similar size and farming demographic.

Morganville grew wheat. Fèves produced wine.

Morganville had a population of 250 back then, Fèves 325.

Nearly 75 percent of Fèves was destroyed by the war, leaving the community with a lack of bedding and shelter, and no milk for the village’s 60 children after three evacuations.

Velma Carson, a Mor-

ganville native and K-State journalism student during World War I, led the movement to adopt Fèves.

Carson wrote the pageant’s script, and fellow resident Velma Young directed the music.

It took 15 days for Carson to write the script to “One World Peace Festival,” which featured elements of cultures from around the world.

Word of the pageant grew, and nearly 3,000 people gathered to see it on Aug. 27.

Lois Eggerman was in high school when she participated in the pageant. Her father



Gérard, then just a boy, grew up in Fèves, France — a town Morganville helped after it was battered during World War II.

played the violin as the people square danced and two-stepped.

“It was a lot of people in our little town,” Eggerman said. “It was a big day and big night.”

On Oct. 23, 1948, the SS Gudrun Maersk left from New York City carrying the first shipment to Fèves, carrying powdered milk, clothes, small toys, seed packets, comforters and other needed supplies.

Residents in both villages continued to exchange letters and gifts.

In 1949, Billie Pierson Utley, Eggerman’s sister, and her husband, Ed Utley, visited Fèves. They stayed in Paris at the time.

The Torlottings even stayed with the Utleys in Paris for a couple of weeks.

Eggerman said the people of Fèves seemed to appreciate the efforts in Morganville.

“People didn’t have the money like they do now,” she said. “They gathered like \$1,000 or something. It’s not much now, but it was back then.”

The sister city relationship

received press attention, including a chapter in “The People Act,” a book written by Elmore McKee, the first chaplain at Yale University and an NBC radio broadcaster — and the pageant’s audio was aired nationally.

Despite friendly relations, though, the relationship began to lose its vigor over the years.

IT TOOK a fortunate series of events for the relationship to spark back to life.

It started this spring when Gloria Freeland, assistant professor of journalism and mass communications at K-State, gave her class an assignment to write about 10 Clay County communities.

“I always try to incorporate some aspect of history with their final project,” she said.

Logan Falletti, junior, Frontenac; Mariah Rietbrock, senior, Minneapolis; and Katie Good, junior, Wamego, wrote the Morganville story.

Falletti said the requirement of a big feature article made Freeland’s section harder.

“Initially, I wished I had been in a different class,” she said. “Seeing how this article has been successful, I think everybody should have to do a big feature.”

Freeland said she didn’t know about Morganville or most of the other towns she’d handed off in assignments — but told students to find an interesting story.

“I didn’t want it to be a dry history piece,” she said. “I wanted them to talk with people who experienced it.”

Falletti said the group had trouble finding much about the town through initial research. She said they eventually found the town’s “crowning achievement.”

“In our digging, we found out there was this pageant,” she said. “We really wanted to do something that was on a large scale.”

Freeland’s husband, Art Vaughn, served as a fact-checker for the project, then published them as a series in the Clay Center Dispatch.

“Both Gloria and I are history nuts,” he said. “She knows I’m more of the researcher and she’s more of the writer.”

Vaughn said the Morganville story immediately stood out once he read it, which led him to create a website that tells the story (morganville-feves.org).

“Rather than touch a few people in the area, we had a town that reached out and touched the world,” he said.



The main street of Fèves, France, during the aftermath of WWII.

VAUGHN SENT two emails, attempting to reach out to Fèves residents — but they were in English, so he wasn’t sure the message would be received.

In August, Vaughn opened his email and saw a message from Hervé Torlotting, Gérard’s son, who had begun translating the messages between Vaughn and his father.

Hervé, who now lives in Houston, said he’d heard about how the Americans helped after the war while he was growing up in Fèves — but without much knowledge of the details.

“What really surprised me it was really some people helping other people,” he said. “It wasn’t a state or city writing off a check. It was the actions of a few people that became very, very big. They helped people on the other side of the ocean who were just like them.”

The communication began, but Vaughn said it was “more of a curiosity decision” without any particular plans for the Torlottings to visit.

Around the beginning of November, Hervé said his dad wanted to visit.

Vaughn said he tried to explain the size of Morganville — “It’s even smaller now than it was then...” — but eventually it became a matter of when the visit would happen, not if it

would occur.

The sister cities began buzzing with excitement.

Johnson said younger people have learned more about the relationship since the reception date has been set.

“I think that anybody that lives in a community should learn something about this,” she said.

Hervé said his family has spent a lot of time talking about the trip.

“It’s a very big topic right now in the family and Fèves,” he said. “A lot of people are talking about this and a lot of people are excited about this.”

Hervé said he wants his first-time visit to reestablish the relationship.

He said the mayor’s office in Fèves has expressed interest in ways to maintain a connection.

“I’m hoping this relationship will not go to sleep again for another 20 or 40 years,” Hervé said. “It’s worth keeping in touch and continuing a sister town partnership to exchange ideas.”

And 65 years after participating in the pageant, Eggerman finally will get a chance to meet someone who benefitted from all the effort in Morganville.

“I can’t believe we’re the older generation now that’s representing Morganville,” she said.



Gloria Freeland, second from right, and journalism students Logan Falletti, Mariah Rietbrock and Katie Good. Freeland’s class researched the connection between Fèves and Morganville.