

# **GAINING CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES FROM THE LAND OF WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR TO THE LAND OF WILLIAM TELL                      FALL SABBATICAL – 2007**

I had long wanted to see le Mont St. Michel and the Bayeux Tapestry. My fall sabbatical gave me an opportunity to fulfill those wishes. In early October, 2007, I left the USA for Switzerland where I rested for two days and then boarded the TGV for Caen in northern France. Here I rented a car from an affable young Frenchman who wanted to talk about the Portland Trailblazers!

I drove from Caen to Bayeux. Bayeux is the home of the Bayeux Tapestry which depicts William the Conqueror's preparation for the invasion of England, the crossing of the English Channel, the Battle of Hastings and his coronation. Embroidered a few years after the battle by ladies of the court, it is breath-taking. This one piece, measuring 20 x 230 inches, provides historians with such things as detailed images of boat construction, the armor used in the eleventh century, Halley's comet and even hair styles of the era.

After visiting a museum in memory of the Allied invasion of the Normandy beaches in 1944, I decided to drive to Omaha Beach. The museum film footage was so disturbing that I wasn't even sure I wanted to go to the beaches. The chilly air was misty and one fishing boat and a few boarded-up foodstands were the only hints of human habitation on the beach. There was, however, one hotel that stayed open during the off season. The proprietor was eager to talk about the history of the beach and to show the many books, photos and letters that survivors had given him over the years as they returned to see where they lost their comrades. Dinner that night in the restaurant, where 63 years earlier blood and bodies covered the earth, seemed irreverent.

From Omaha Beach I took an autoroute through beautiful farmland to Mont St. Michel. Originally built as a monastery in the eighth century, it was also a safe haven because a horse could not run faster than the in-coming tide. It also is surrounded by quick sand. Now there is a causeway to allow access. As I approached it, it was difficult to see in the mist but its ghostly silhouette slowly emerged. Its engineering and construction challenges leave one wondering how it was possible to build such a structure. The French are re-engineering the causeway because it has caused problems to the flore and fauna of the immediate area.

From here I drove to Cancale where a movie that I use in the second year class was filmed. The movie is a mystery about a murder in the oyster beds of Cancale. It was almost as if I had already been there. I ate a platter of crustaceans at a bay-side restaurant before sleeping

soundly with the sound of the bay a few feet from my window. Cancale has an important museum of oyster culture.

I enjoyed my scenic and relaxing drive back to Caen to return the car and make the 12-hour train ride back to Switzerland or Helvetia, the land of William Tell (14<sup>th</sup> century).

In Sion, in the Rhone Valley, friends met me and we went to their chalet in Vex, high above the valley. This is at the entrance to the Val d'Herens, where 40 years ago, it was quite normal to see women dressed in their black, long traditional costumes putting up hay under a 95 degree sun. This is also the area where local patois dialects of latin origin are still spoken. Children can study some patois in the local schools and adults can take evening classes in patois at the local "universite populaire". Through the "Federation Cantonale Valaisanne des Amis du Patois" I was able to obtain a CD of some local dialects and a recent book (2004), Les Patois du Valais, comparing some of the dialects. There are at least 23 patois interest groups in the French-speaking area of Switzerland. Even today children can be heard speaking patois in the higher reaches of this stunning valley. In some families it is the language of choice.

My friend's grand-daughter, Shadya, spent a lot of time SMS-ing on their newly-acquired computer so I joined her several days to learn some abbreviated French.

My next stop was in Bienne in north-western Switzerland. I taught English here for 5 years in the 70's so it was an emotional trip as I spent time with a former student, Aldo, who is now principal of the only Gymnase Francais in Bienne. Bienne is the site of the headquarters for Rolex, Omega and Heuer watches. It is also on the Lac de Bienne where one can visit St. Peter's Island, one of Rousseau's favorite hide-aways. No, I didn't find any of his lost manuscripts in some remote attic!

In spite of Aldo's help and encouragement I could not convince any of the English instructors to agree to exchange e-mails with my second-year French class.

I used the sabbatical time to read the following books:

Bodanis, D. (2006). *Passionate Minds (A Biography of Voltaire)*

Manchester, W. (1992). *A World Lit Only by Fire (A Study of the Medieval Mind and the Renaissance)*

Nemirovsky, I. (2004). *Suite Francaise*

Reid, T.R. (2004). *The United States of Europe*

Schiff, S. (2005). *A Great Improvisation: Franklin, France, and the Birth of America*

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Fay D'Ambrosia