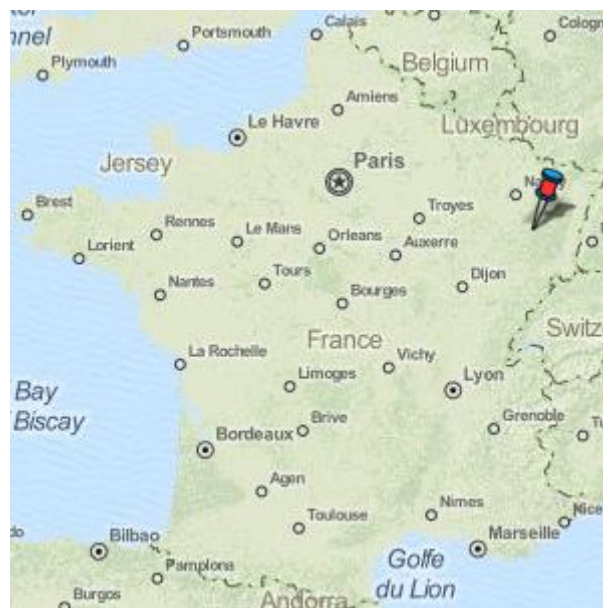


Audlem and District History Society

History Shorts 24 by Linda Simard

A village in the Vosges

In the 1980s, my French husband, two young children and I came to live in a small village of about 420 inhabitants in the Vosges «département», in the east of France. We had lived for six years in Paris and I immediately fell in love with the place: unpretentious, very French and, in some ways, reminiscent of simpler times. After Paris, it was wonderful: country walks straight from our door, milk straight from the cows at the farm next door...and Mirabelle brandy straight from the still! This was in a tiny shed, where you could, if you paid your tax in advance (all above board!), take your Mirabelle plums, and some firewood if you wanted to pay less, and pick up your brandy later for bottling.



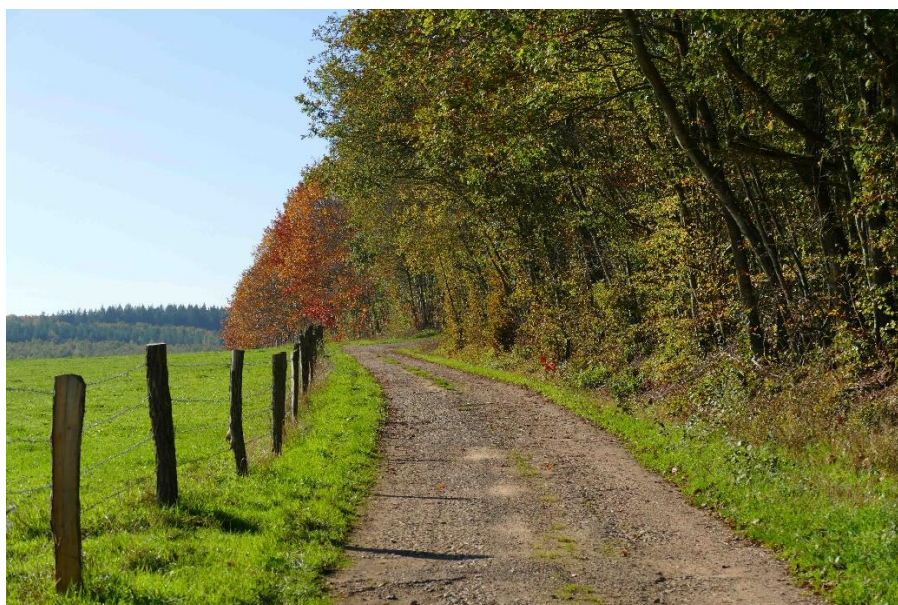
This is not a wine-producing area, but in times gone by there were many small vineyards, producing wine for family consumption, and some families still have vines. At the end of the summer, their friends and relations all come one Sunday to pick the grapes and celebrate with a big meal. The wine is far from being a «grand cru»!



Like all French villages, we have our own «mairie» (town hall), mayor and council. As everyone knows everyone else, and there are some long-standing family feuds, this can be a source of conflict, especially at election times! Weddings take place at the «mairie» in a very simple and friendly atmosphere. In France, there is a strict separation between church and state: if you want a religious ceremony, you have to get married twice!



The village is surrounded by forests and inhabitants are entitled to a certain amount of firewood every year, cut and delivered to your house, for a very modest charge. However, most of the able-bodied men choose to cut their own wood, cheaper, but hard and potentially dangerous work. My husband, fresh from city life, bravely bought a chainsaw and became an amateur lumberjack. Lots are drawn at the «mairie» to decide who gets which patch of forest. They cut the wood into lengths of one metre, pile it up, pay a nominal charge for it and get a farmer to bring it home, if they haven't got a tractor themselves. This system is still popular, but a lot of the new inhabitants prefer other modern forms of heating, simpler and less labour-intensive.



There was a primary school, where our children spent some happy years, with two classes of mixed levels and slates and chalk were still used for some activities. There wasn't much in the way of equipment, but the teachers had time for each child, organised trips and joined in with village activities and, as one of them proudly told me: "They all know their basics when they go off to secondary school!". It was true.

It was a wonderful place for children to grow up. Roaming around in woods and fields, and in summer, swimming and sometimes camping at a secluded place by the river, intriguingly known as 'the girls' bathing place'. There is a 'boys' bathing place' too, further upriver, which is no longer used, but obviously in the old days there was a certain gender separation...although the two spots weren't too far apart!

There are quite a few newcomers, as new houses have been built, though the council is trying to limit this development now, to keep the village atmosphere. Obviously, the newcomers, like us, are not farming folk, but commute to jobs in town every day.

When we arrived, there were about eight small farms, now there are only four. Some of the farmers have joined together to form co-operative farms in order to survive. None of them have dairy cattle now: they say it's impossible to make a living from them on a small-scale farm.



A farm in the centre of the village still divided into three parts

The traditional farmhouses in the lower-lying areas of the Vosges are not isolated in the countryside but all in a row in the main street. At the back of the houses are vegetable plots and fields; at the front, a strip of common land which was used for machinery, woodpiles and manure heaps (there was still one in front of our neighbour's farm for several years after we came here). The farmhouses themselves housed people and animals under the same roof, the building being divided into three parts: the living quarters, the barn with an arched doorway, and the cowsheds. Now the cowsheds have generally been converted for extra living space and the barn is either a garage or a big living room. Modern cowsheds and barns have been built outside the village to provide more space.

To be continued.