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The Missouri Miner's Daughter Still Speaks French*

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The following is not "merely" a new history of French-speaking people in North America. Such history has been expertly written and re-written both by actual first-time visitors to these areas and by professional historians, from Champlain and Charlevoix to Parkman and more recently. Carl Ekberg and John Mack Faragher. Since I have neither the necessary professional competence nor the desire to add yet another title to the countless others in this rich, unending field of study. I have chosen instead to compose a more personal type of composition about certain events, places and things, which just happens to be largely about French America. A written as opposed to strictly visual travelogue, if you prefer, all centered around the history of the latter.

Yet, the truth of the matter is that the present essay does not just happen to be about the subject of French America. For, I have to admit to at least some knowledge of French colonial history as a result of my own teaching and research in French Literature over the past twenty five years. In addition, because of quite deliberate attempts on my part to acquaint myself as thoroughly as I could with the major places, people and events connected to the 400-year French presence in the so-called New World, from Cheticamp, Cap Breton to Peoria, Illinois to Carencro, Louisiana, it would be disingenuous to imply that my choice of topic results from mere happenstance. In the long narrative of this continued presence around us all in North America, moreover, I have found an exemplary trajectory with which to help me trace and understand better my own personal voyage through life, a voyage like that of other individuals, is full of loss and renewal. Thus, it is important to remember throughout that this article does not constitute a mere nostalgic lamentation of what has passed. Rather, it aims to engage in both real

and imagined conversations between several pasts, presents and futures: mine as well as those of many others.

Prologue

Time talks in differing tongues. Its voices cry out in the wilderness as well as in the city. Faceless voices, headless voices, errant voices, all speak of what was, and of what could have been. Such voices alternate between the personal and collective, the serious and silly, the elitist and vulgar, the factual and imagined, the lyrical and epic, the tragic and joyful, the mean-spirited and kind, the sensical and nonsensical. Disembodied, they strive to revive presences once alive and whole, now moribund or fragmented. Only full-bodied voices pretend to tell what already is, or what may yet be.

The body of the present article talks a lot about what is no more. In different registers and tones, it tries to recollect and then re-inscribe into our collective memory some of the most important places and traces of a people who once formed the heart of a New World in North America: the French, from their arrival in the sixteenth century to the eventual diaspora and cultural rebirth of many of them throughout different parts of the continent. In exploring this body of words, readers will often find no more than a simple story of a complex past, a story of lost heritages, adventures and deeds. At other times, they may discern the shape of a personal reflection on the particulars of contemporary history and culture in their relation to the past or future. At still other times, this essay will resemble its author, his life and his humors, not because of any presumed human exemplarity à la Saint Augustine, Montaigne or Rousseau, but because of a number of coincidences accidentally linking his life to a vast French Empire he wishes to recall, anew. All these voices, whether faithfully recorded or purposely disconnected from the bodies which give them life, inspire the words ahead. The sole body to which they belong is thus the borderless corpus of Language itself. For

Language, like History, continually renews itself as it passes on the past [...]

Hic et Nunc

"Après moi. le Déluge!" -attributed to Louis XV

July 14. 1993: Bastille Day in the bicentennial year of the Reign of Terror. The rain has made the Mississippi River so terrifyingly high today it'll make you loose your head just thinking about it. True, the water levels of this "flood of the century" aren't anything like what they were back in 1785—the frightful *innée des grandes eaux*—when it probably poured for more than forty days and forty nights. This year's deluge does, however, bear some resemblance to the most cataclysmic events this region has ever witnessed, which include not just floods, but major earthquakes, centered on the New Madrid fault of southern Missouri. A quack seismologist named Browning will soon remind us of this history of New Madrid's deadly potential for quakes when he offers a precise prediction of one sometime in the near future.

The New Madrid area's calamities wreak havoc untold numbers of earlier settlements and military outposts up and down the river valley. In past times, these have included such towns as Kaskaskia. Saint Philippe, Chartres, as well as the French (then Spanish then American then French) Fort de Chartres. These catastrophes periodically change the entire region's topography and geography, and have done so from the time records have been kept. The big difference this time, though, is that there will be only one moderately sized victim. Yalmeyer. Illinois, on the east bank of the great river. Old Valmeyer. now lost, was a small town that until this summer day lay just south of the massive dikes built by the city of Saint Louis, a city which has to protect itself from similar inundations it too has known since its founding by fur trader Pierre Laclede and his fifteen year old assistant, Auguste Chouteau in 1764. In that year. Laclede, the energetic young head of the firm of Maxent. Laclede and Déé in New Orleans, had been granted exclusive Indian trade rights for the Upper Mississippi by Governor D'Abbadie, who was always looking for ways to spur the economy of that vast territory then called Louisiana. The site he selected would soon be called *Pain Court* because of its habitual lack of bread. In that century, Hour came from the town of Sainte Geneviève, further south along the river, where fur trading was far less extensive and where agriculture was far more so. Bespoken by its name, the nascent city's lack of bread only exacerbated the general misery felt by the area's first *habitants*. This misery had already been noted by Spaniards who. on the their way up river, initially nicknamed Sainte Geneviève, this semi-tropical bread basket, *Miseria*.

But. one need not worry about such depressing matters at this time, since, here and now. you are many miles away from nasty natural disasters and creature discomforts. Sitting fatly in front of your satellite TV, you watch news reports flooding in about the flood of the century, without much concern for the safety of your own home and family. Too

bad those people along the flood plain choose to live where they do. They must be stubborn as mules, since they know—such disasters are par for the course in this part of world. Why don't they just get up and leave, and find another place to live? Why don't they at least find some higher ground on which to build their homes? Oh. well, that's their problem. I guess; there's nothing we can do about them.

But then, inexplicably, the scene and voices change and you find yourself on just such higher ground. Far away from the security of your modern living room, you're in the middle of the countryside, high up in some wildly picturesque hills. You're suddenly on top of what the English as well as the French used to call a *cavalier*, that is. a kind of fortification built slightly higher than anything around it. The cavalier commands a good tactical view of the environs and remains at a protective remove from potential danger. From there, you have what the French military in times long past used to call a *perspective cavalière*. Up and down the valleys of the Mississippi, Illinois, Wisconsin, Saint Lawrence rivers and at various points along the Great Lakes, the French military built forts that contained numerous cavaliers. In any case, where you're standing now is a spot somewhere behind the cemetery of Saint Joachim's Roman Catholic Church, in Old Mines, Missouri, about two hundred yards from a clay kiln fired up for a special occasion. One of the main details about the church worth noting is its silvery pointed steeple. This detail reminds you right away of other such steeples topping off French-speaking, Catholic churches scattered throughout the countryside in the province of Québec. It's hard to believe that architectural analogs of this type exist a thousand miles away from each other.

But then, you remember how the lands in between are in fact connected by several imposing bodies of water, notably the Great Lakes, and who knows how many other important rivers. You don't have to be a geographer like Champlain. or a geologist, supposedly like Browning, therefore, to figure out that somebody could well have come down river with similar ideas of how to build such structures. As a result, thanks to your slightly elevated perspective, you can now easily make out the contours of the aforementioned kiln, a culinary clay fossil hopelessly lost, out of place and out of time. From there, you make a further sensorial leap between this otherwise nondescript rural oven and the millennial aged aroma of freshly baked wheat bread seeping out of it. How can you not appreciate all the more this relic when you see a middle-aged resident, who today plays the role of the festive village baker, anxiously pointing to it. in order that his young apprentice come over to remove from it the now-ready loaf? The boy accomplishes this simple task with the help of a long, thin, forked wooden shovel that in no way resembles the ones used in the local IMO's chain of pizzerias. You can't quite see it yet, but the shovel used by the apprentice is instead an exact duplicate of those illustrated in Diderot's eighteenth-century *Encyclopédie*, in the section describing agricultural and manufacturing imple-

ments. Seeing and smelling the bread, you forget about the creature comforts you just left behind in your urban dwelling up in Saint Louis. You forget about the central air-conditioning, polished hardwood floors, cable TV, fancy kitchen utensils, living and dining room accoutrements and other *things*, that George Perec brilliantly parodies in his novel *Les Choses*, a scathing critique of 1960s consumerism. You begin instead to contemplate far older, far simpler objects, objects that, like the people who lived with and among them, have somehow been lost through a catastrophic misplacement of memory. The savory appearance of this bread has temporarily erased all reminders of a life you know you still have, of a mind-set you have no intention of discarding.

Somewhere along the way down Ole-factory lane, which opens its gates when the smell of that marvelous country-fresh bread reaches your nostrils, you then retrace your steps. For some unknown reason, you remember certain gruff country bumpkins you saw just a few hours ago on the outskirts of Sainte Geneviève. You begin to hear the sounds of a band-on-the-run-away-from-the-water that is sandbagging like crazy several miles back down in the valley. Due to your *cavalier* perspective, you don't bother to dwell too long on what all these people are about to lose. For you are about to take instead a huge, satisfying bite out of a warm, golden staff of life just handed to you by the baker's apprentice from the same type of outdoor clay oven you recently saw at the Acadian Village in Caraquet. New Brunswick. Rather than fret about the terror those poor sandbaggers below are confronting as you eat and as they prepare to face the devastating effects of murderous rain, you thus say to yourself, *cavalierly*: Let them eat cake, if they have no bread! On this day and in this delirious way, Old Mines. Missouri, along with its other still smaller, still poorer neighbors, like Richwoods. Cadet. French Village and Bonne Terre, presents itself as one of those places left on the planet seemingly forgotten by time. Forgotten by time, but not by Andy Bettman and me. Andy is the president of a local mining company who once gave me a piece of barite (or "tiff/" as it is known there), the favorite mineral mined in this area. He and I spend the day taking pictures of broken-down shacks that we know were built by French-speaking miners within the last century. This is a place where what happens elsewhere often just doesn't seem to matter. Or, to put it in the deliberately nonsensical way of the band, "Talking Heads": Old Mines today appears a little like "Heaven, a place where nothing ever happens." Thanks to its carefree citizenry—which includes, as it happens, a number of families named, appropriately. *Sansoucie*—this tiny village stands unfazed in the foothills of the Ozarks, safely removed from the Middle-American access route of their ancestors. Today still. Old Mines offers proof that a unique mid-Missourian Creole culture has not yet entirely disappeared, retaining, as it does, traces of this special culture's smells, sounds and tastes.

Of course, don't think for a moment that the gradual and irreversible loss of such traces is not literally *excruciating* to some of its oldest living representatives. The pain these seniors feel about separation from their language and traditions has to be similar to what it feels like being ripped away from a cross, as their beloved Saviour was. If you don't believe me, just walk around the front of Saint Joachim and note how these thoroughly wonderful, Godfearing, tradition-loving Catholics continue to list the days and hours for mass in French only. You note this peculiar inscription on a cross-shaped sign welcoming you from the road as you drive by that much adored church. Go around the corner and back across the street, over by the two old cabins, and see too how, for almost two hundred years, they have used the same foreign signs for the names and departure dates of lost ones remembered in limestone and iron sepulchers, scattered like nondescript dead leaves over hundred of square feet in the adjacent cemetery. Notice, too, how all around the entire region—from the cemeteries in Bellefontaine Neighbors. Saint Louis and in Saint Charles' Barromeo's church, to those on the other side of the river, behind the Holy Family in Cahokia or south of Saint Joseph's in Prairie du Rocher, on a small lot next to what was the first and now lost village of Kaskaskia. and then again back across the river to perhaps the most impressive one still standing anywhere, in Sainte Geneviève—notice how French-speaking *habitants* often placed their two foot thick concrete tombs on top of the ground, for fear of potentially damaging waters. When you take a car from the French city of Caen. Normandy, which has known its share, too, of devastating losses, to the American cemetery at Colleville-sur-Mer, where thousands of D-Day G Is today rest peacefully, among a mind-numbing, pristine uniformity of erect markers making them seem to stand still at attention: or when you travel from there through the Normand countryside along the Seine to Paris, or from Québec along yet another river to Montréal, you cannot help but notice the same type of monument. You then begin to see patterns emerging. Patterns passed down and respected by a dozen different generations. Patterns still visible all around the bayou country of modern-day Louisiana too, from Lafayette to Butte-La-Rose. and from New Orleans to Baton Rouge.

If not for the excruciating fear of losing a quasi-mystical connection with the body politic of New France, then, why else would the good people of Old Mines still bother to write their church hours in a language other than English? How else do you explain the anomaly of trying, against all reasonable hope, to avoid cultural anonymity, to retain some type of French identity utterly unknown to most individuals, unknown above all, to most of the French themselves? Not far away from you now lies a possible answer. There stands stately, plump Mrs. Peggy Politic sweltering in a typical colonial, light blue dress with faded lace trim and white bonnet. Today, October 4, 1993, is the biggest gathering in the town's annual weekend *Fête à Renaud*, so named after a former entrepreneur, Philippe Renault.

It was he who first brought French-speaking settlers into this lead mining area. Like the investors backing John Law's infamously ineffectual reforms and the soon-to-be bankrupt *Compagnie d'Occident*, Renault, too, believed in the possibility of quick profits. Finding none that looked promising in an area in central Illinois about two hundred miles farther up the Illinois river, around the former Fort Crève-Coeur-built forty years earlier in 1682 by Cavalier De La Salle's men on an elevated spot known simply as *Le Rocher*—he soon went back downstream. Today, you have returned to la Vieille Mine almost three months after your First visit, thinking, hoping, praying, it will have cooled off a bit.. Compared to that hellish July afternoon when your head practically melted off, the weather today is indeed somewhat less oppressive.

Sometime around 1720 or 1721, however, Monsieur Renault came up from New Orleans on his first visit, accompanied (it is said, though nowhere proved) by anywhere between one and three hundred African slaves he had hand-picked in the Caribbean. He, too, was shocked, as you are today, to learn that the heat around the area was not the result of the lead smelting furnaces he and his associates had just built. Perhaps his slaves felt at home, meteorologically speaking, but certainly not him. Like everyone else connected to the growing settlement in the Illinois country, Renault tried to cope as well as he could. He soon made his headquarters at Fort de Chartres, on the Illinois side, about forty miles from here. At the time, the brand new fort—eventually reconstructed in more solid fashion by Captain Saucier, his head military engineer—was made of logs. The commander of the fort, Dugue de Boisbriant, apparently hadn't yet understood that the region's generalized humidity and savage river were not kind to flimsy wooden structures. People with more engineering knowledge, like Renault, however, together with the terrible earthly violations wrought annually by Time, would soon thereafter make him and his successors, Du Tisné, De PradeL De Liette and D'Artaguette painfully aware that the stone quarried throughout this mining region made a much wiser building material for the fort than wood ever could. Boisbriant would likely have had his head handed to him by the king had he not eventually smartened up, seen the light, and built the fort out of stone. For wood rotted too quickly, that was obvious to almost anyone. Sooner or later, as everyone knows, wood attracts nuisances of countless creepy-crawly varieties. And the fort was, after all, meant to be rock-solid and stable, as it was designed to serve as the principal administrative and defensive edifice for this small but important crossroads in the Illinois country.

* * *

Fanning herself now to avoid the horrific heat that stifles anyone foolish enough to stay out of the mulberry-tree shade bathing her cabin's porch, gentle Madame Politte rearranges the antique wooden chairs cluttering up her outside *galerie*. She appears to come closer as she prepares to answer the very question she sees me about to ask. As

she finishes rearranging her chairs. I walk straight over to her and say. "Sony to bother, Ma'am, but, the man over there told me that some people around here still speak French. Is that true?" With a smile that reveals the answer even before she opens her mouth, Mrs. Politte proudly replies, "*Mais oui, ben sûr, mon chau!*" Startled by her pigeon French I quickly walk up three rickety cedar steps which separate us, and sit on a small wooden stool under the overhanging roof. I prepare myself to listen carefully to what she might teach me about the area in which she has grown up. Truth is I'm quietly amused by this charming, historical re-enactor named Politte. I'm amused because she clearly doesn't know enough •proper" French to realize that she has just neglected to make an important phonemic distinction between the adjective "dear" (*cher*) and the noun "cat." (chat). Although someone must have had the responsibility to select her to participate in this charming little folkloric festival—in part, no doubt, for her considerable linguistic abilities—she can't fool me. I know a fake from the real thing.

Even so. I wisely leave my unwarranted pedantry aside and decide immediately to play along with the town's weekend game and its quaint re-enactors. They seem innocuous enough. So. I follow her as she turns and walks into a one-room shack, which she claims is no mere reproduction of a colonial house. It is in fact, or so she says, the actual house her great, great grandfather, Auguste Politte, built for himself and his beloved wife Pélagie right after the Civil War. It turns out that the Hippolite family, French citizens from the western coastal city of La Rochelle, lost the first part of their name upon debarking a full century before into the valley of this great New World lead mine, when local "Americans" (whom they often called "*Boslonnais*") shortened it "for convenience" to "Politte." Local yokels in Ellis Island did the same later to my own maternal grandfather, whose last name "Vlazakis" was shortened to "Vlazos" or "Blazos."

It is startling to note how inconvenient it is, though, for real people when they are forced to swallow such nomen-clatural amputation. One just lops off a name as if it were a tree trunk, when in point of fact, it is more like lopping off a person's head or heart. I myself, like countless other Americans, have been the victim of such butchery, and long ago resolved as a result to call myself "Slam" instead of "Stamos" so that I could cleverly say to my interlocutor, "In Greece, my name is like that of any other Stam. Dick or Harry!" It is also true that some immigrants actually preferred to have their names shortened so as to appear more "American" right from the start. In any case, no one with a more common name could ever know the dread of waiting for someone in a room to call out your "exotic" name, knowing well in advance the subsequent uneasiness of those who would continue not to want to call you by that name, for fear of appearing "impolite" to me. Or should I say imPolitte?

Anyway, many of I lippolites, like the Boyers and the Prattes and the Paschias and the Roberts and the Thomures and

the Bequettes and the Desloges and the Dufours and the Aubuchons, came to Old Mines via the river town of Sainte Geneviève. The latter lies some 35 miles farther to the southeast, close to the saline creek riverbanks that furnished so much of the salt needed in colonial times all around the region, by natives as well as settlers. After dealing, however, for over four generations with massive, catastrophic floods, occasionally belligerent Osage or Peoria tribesmen, and perennially prudish Protestants, the family's elders one day decided that life in the woods ("the forest primeval") and labor in languorous holes, dug artificially or otherwise in iron-rich soil, would be vastly better than dealing daily, as they had for years in Sainie-Genevieve, with the discouraging vicissitudes of the Mighty Mississip'. Hence, they up and moved one day in a broken-down, horse-drawn wooden *charrette* whose very sideboards would one day be recycled in order to start the floor of Madame Polities present abode.

As we enter her modest cabin, the boards now begin to creak in a strangely familiar fashion. The sound reminds me of one I always imagine was made long ago by several curious wagon trains that stiiggled through the swamps of Georgia during the American Revolution. My imaginary trains are really caravans of *charrettes* en route back to various Acadian villages. Their drivers, a band of disoriented vagabonds at that time, precipitously abandoned these villages back in 1755. If you listen carefully now you can still hear the crying voices of thousands of valiant, albeit miserable, souls from the Northern coasts of modern day Nova Scotia and the Eastern coasts of New Brunswick. The said souls, primarily farmers, were forced by the British to leave their homes because they refused to pledge allegiance to the Crown during the French and Indian Wars, which lead to what the Acadians eventually called *le Grand Derangement*. If you turn down your Walkman and really listen, you can hear them describe the desire that keeps burning inside of them to return to the lost land of their fathers and mothers. At the same time, within the interstices of these voices, you might also be lucky enough to discern still more voices of countless other *pionniers* who have made similarly woeful trips both here and in other countries, for no one place or people has a monopoly on the legendary power of such star-guided treks.

But still, there is something special about this specific odyssey across our continent that hasn't been fully appreciated by most North American Anglophones. One cannot dispute the fact that had certain events not occurred the way they did, we might all now be speaking French throughout the entire lower half of North America as well as in the far northeastern part and a few small pockets here and there. Perhaps, then, it is a sense of mortality, a growing realization of what André Gide must have felt when writing his own autobiography. ///// *die*, that makes one comprehend better than whoever or whatever once was must be lost in order to appreciate more fully what actually was. So.

when Mrs. Politic comes over to the primitive cedar chair where I'm sitting and offers me, mercifully, a cold drink of water. I begin to wonder just how much of this festival is re-enacted and how much is really real. I begin, hesitatingly, to ask myself whether she and her cronies, Madame Thibault and Madame Letourne are really re-enactors at all: whether instead, they are time-warped survivors of an as-yet unknown "Reality TV" show?

As she then hands me some salty *craquelins* fresh out of an outdoor copper cauldron to munch on. I cannot stop staring at these three women in a most disquieting way. Because you're already there I won't bother reproducing in its entirety here the galling Gallic speech we both hear these women use to communicate their past and present lives. The title of a Québécois documentary film on the citizens of Old Mines will give you some idea of their singular idiom: "*C'est pu comme ça* anymore." Suffice it to say, however, that when in the course of their respective narratives these Missouri miners' daughters switch from serving us course one, those delicious salty *craquelin* snacks, to course two, some newly-arrived, sweet, powdered *chouquettes*, we both begin to see that we are not in Missouri anymore. Toto. On this day and in this place we are suddenly far away from a simple black-and-white world where one can easily distinguish between Re-enacting and Actually-Being.

Instead, we now find ourselves like Dorothy, after the Kansas "whopper," in a complex, technicolor sphere: a trans-historical, simultaneous, consubstantial reality in which the present is connected to the past and future, yet thoroughly undifferentiated from them in terms of value. Divorced from the distinctions passed down to us from the Enlightenment, if not from much earlier, our postmodern imaginations now race around deliriously, like chickens with their heads cut off, unable to say either what IS, WAS or WILL BE important. Silting in this dark, humid, wooden inferno, right smack in the middle of Middle America, you and I suddenly realize that what these women are saying to us today may well be just as useful to our general understanding of life as anything we might read or experience in more culturally recognized venues. What they teach us opens up a door not just to Mrs Politte's log cabin, lout to a home inhabited by everyone at one time or other, by every American at least. In 1985 the neighboring town of Potosi was, after all, the official population center of the United States, demographically speaking. At the heart of America thus lies France, willy-nilly, from Lafayette's Cajun music to D-Day cemeteries to the international political fallout after 9/11. That said, the vision of a mosaic showing a crouching, teary-eyed, red-white-and blue Marianne, symbol of France, lovingly laying the lifeless body of yet another GI into her country's soil, suddenly shines down on me from a rotunda ceiling I once saw in a small marble chapel honoring our veterans at Colleville-sur-mer, a few miles from Omaha Beach. Who still thinks the French hate us Americans?

For this reason, it is safe to assume that this is no ordinary village festival anymore: no, it is no mere stage. Hovering

outside of space and time. Mrs. Polities cabin has instead become I lome itself. A limitless repository of lost voices, it never moves or changes. If you hear what these three women say you will never have to wonder: When shall we meet these three again? For their voices will always be with you. if not their flesh and bones. And their voices will continue lo make you realize why, alas, poor Heraclitus. my distant ancestor, was mistaken. After all, he was under the erroneous assumption that one could never step into the same river twice. Too bad he never stepped into the Mississippi, nor knew what the river knows, as one of my colleagues. Wayne Fields, puts it.

Finally then, thus spake Madame Politte: "*Mon arrière-arrière grand père*/My great-great grandfather, Auguste, came to Old Mines because he was sick of fighting. Sick of fighting on the borders between North and South, East and West, French and English. More sick still of fighting the river. Up in these hills, water was no longer a problem. But food and other commodities were. You can see by the poverty all around here still that people had little to do besides mine. The conditions here were no better than those of our faraway cousins in France who, as you probably know, were best described by a writer named Emile Zola in a book called *Germinal*. The only difference is that no one sang their praises the way that the great Accuser did in the newspapers and novels of his time. No, there really was nothing romantic at all about the lives our ancestors lived. [In other words, their lives were "pure" naturalism, thought I, in literary parlance.] They were simply poor, and remained that way for three generations up until World War II."

"Now, maybe you don't realize this," she continues, "but there are photographs you can still see in the old courthouse in Potosi that show you the kinds of *cabanes* people like my grandparents lived in before they were demolished. When you first look at these pictures, you'll probably assume that these cabins were much like those you imagine other *pionniers* of the Old West lived in: one-room log structures with somewhat primitive furnishings, such as the caned chair you're sitting on now. And you'd be right, of course, to think that. But, when you look at these photographs you need to remember one tiny detail about these people: they did not speak English, or at least not very well. These were not your typical Ozark hillbilly types. They just happened to live there."

Mais,pardon, Madame Politte," I inject. "Surely you don't think your family is the only one that came to this country speaking another language, or with different customs, do you?"

Ben sur, non. Pas du toutr she replies, smiling at her two old friends. "Thai's not the point. What I mean to say is that they didn't just come here from some other place. They were already here, for hundreds of years already, in the midst of English-speaking Protestants, carrying on with their

lives, as if lost from the pages of any known history from any place on earth. Just try to imagine it: hundreds of us. randomly scattered throughout this huge continent, among so- called Indians and other temporary passersby, incapable of intermingling fully, yet also incapable, over the long haul, of not doing so."

What she meant by this comment was of course all too obvious to a grownup '60s kid like myself. The golden oldies station KLOLI in St. Louis just then belts out a Crosby, Stills and Nash tune from the transistor radio playing in Mrs. Politte's house: "And if you can't be with the one you love. Honey, love the one you're with!" Such, then, is the wisdom of the ages.

"So, then, none of you is full-blooded French or even French Canadian, right?" I asked naively. "Bui. of course, we are!" she quickly shot back. You see. one doesn't get away with insinuations like that in rural Missouri. To tell the truth, though, let me ask you readers this: Is that part of the world really any different from any other? Who doesn't pretend to be descended from good stock, or at least from several more or less well-defined ethnic sources? Even those independent-minded enough to claim good naturally, or to proclaim proudly, to be part of that great race vaguely known as "Mongrels" can locate some particular strain(s) among their heterogeneous genes. Yet. who really is immune to *métissage*? The first annual French Heritage Seminar put on by the Old Mines Area Historical Society was an occasion in 2005 to recollect numerous connections of consanguinity between the local French-speaking, white population, the Osage and the Sioux peoples. Who knows then what happens in every generation, in every nook and cranny of his granny's hereditary closet? No one, of course. No, not even the most well-documented, insufferably snobbish Parisian from the 16th arrondissement with official writs up the proverbial wazoo.

What that means, then, is this: either you accept the fact that we all, indirectly, belong to a hodgepodge called the Human Race, or else, you stop worrying about what the Parisian TV-friendly philosopher BHL. Bernard Henri-Levy, calls "dangerous purity." The only other option is to try, to varying degrees, to establish some sort of pedigree, some distinction, some differentiation that sets you apart from, and not wholly together with, beings of a certain ilk. Thus, when French missionaries first began to spread the Good News throughout "savage" lands, they were surprisingly surprised to learn that most every Native they encountered pretended to be the son or grandson of a great Indian chief. Later on, when the inevitable happened between dashing French *coureurs de bois*, *engages* and *habitants* and the indigenous female population, the situation evolved to where, no longer content to be "merely" descended from a famous warrior or the like, the Native American would also claim a certain sanguinary panache via his or her Gallicized pedigree.

Here in Old Mines today we are instead confronted with someone who wishes, no more or less, to have us recognize simply her common "French American" roots, to see her unique identity as both absolute presence and ineluctable anachronism. That is to say, as both one and two at the same time; as someone here and now, and as someone from there and then. Such lexical shifts get your head spinning again when you try to reconcile them with Mrs.

Politte's dual nature, her Janus genes. Contemplating them, you become delirious again, as if your head were tumbling around, like a paddle wheel in a riverboat. And thus, here and now, we are transported back to life on or near the Mississippi, as it's always been, notwithstanding the ghost of Mark Twain.