

THE FRENCH COLONY OF THE COTTONWOOD VALLEY

by

Barbara Livingston

For many years people have referred to a "lost" French colony in the Cottonwood River valley, at the western edge of the Kansas Flint Hills. Its first immigrants were French, and they called the settlement a "colony." It is no more "lost," however, than other foreign settlements in Kansas. Some imposing granite grave stones, a few crumbling foundations, names of places, folklore, and a handful of descendants keep the memory of the French-speaking community alive.

The French began to settle the Cottonwood River valley in 1857, three years after the opening of Kansas Territory. They were, for the most part, farmers and tradesmen who came to Kansas for the same reasons other nationalities came--to better their economic and social conditions and to escape political repression. From 1857 through 1885, the colony grew steadily. The United States Census Report in 1885 indicated that between 50 and 60 French families resided in the valley, living largely in Cottonwood Township (Chase County) and also in Doyle Township (Marion County). A few French families were scattered in the towns of Cottonwood Falls, Florence and Marion.¹

In an article published in *Chase County Historical Sketches*, attorney John Madden wrote, "The Brenots, Bichets, Marlinets, Collets, Ravenetts, LaLoges, Bernards, LaLouettes, Rosiers, Ransoms, Ferlets, Mercets, Geneis, Cazes, Gosts, Comte de Pingrys, and many others impressed themselves on the early life of the Cottonwood Valley."² These French pioneers made many contributions to the region. They

planted the first vineyards in Kansas, and they brought Catholicism to the valley.³

The first French people to settle along the Cottonwood came in 1857--the Lievin Daems, Francis Bernard and his wife, Joseph Cucnin and Solomon Schultz (a Prussian), and "several other men." They established Cottonwood City in Wise County, with each man claiming 40 acres in the townsite. In 1858 others arrived, including the Bishops, Gilliards, Dodards, Furers, Potrys and Ravenets, who settled on choice farmland in the lush valley. By 1860 there were 17 French people in Chase County and another French settler in nearby Marion County.⁴

The Francis Bernard and Claude Bichet families, both born in Dijon, France, were instrumental in the early establishment and growth of the French colony. Throughout the expansion period of the 1860s and 1870s, they helped their countrymen settle land disputes, gave them temporary employment or housing, and acted as interpreters.⁵

Francis Bernard, a fervent Republican, had taken an active role in opposition to Louis Napoleon's imperial regime. During the 1850s, Napoleon's heavy-handed police state tactics drove thousands of Republicans like Bernard into exile.⁶

In 1854 Francis and Hermance Bernard left France, never to return. They lived first in New York City, then Illinois, and then St. Louis. It was here in the latter place, presumably, that Francis learned about Kansas Territory. He and Hermance came to the

Cottonwood Valley via the Santa Fe Trail. They preempted 160 acres of farmland on Cedar Creek, two miles northeast of what is now Cedar Point. Evidently, the Bernards had fled France with some money--Francis brought with him adequate supplies to stock a trading post in the Cottonwood City Township.⁷

Francis Bernard eventually became one of Chase County's most prosperous farmer-stockraisers. He also became a director and a major stockholder of the Chase County National Bank from its organization in 1882 until his death in 1910.⁸ Remnants of the Bernard family log home are still visible from the banks of the Cottonwood River, according to area residents. A second larger two-story house, with barns, has been torn down. For years, it is said, their home was the scene of large holiday dinners and Bastille Day picnics. After Hermance's death in 1903, Francis erected a 10-foot tall granite monument in the Cedar Point cemetery south of town in her memory. The imposing white and charcoal gray stone is etched on one side with the following inscription: "Hermance Senevay, wife of Francois Bernard, born in France November 20, 1833, died January 6, 1903. Came to America in 1854. Settled in Chase County, Kan. 1857. She was the first lady settler in this part of the county. Her death was regretted by her husband and friends." Around the grave-marker, on all four sides, Francis built an ornamental, wrought-iron fence. According to local folklore, the granite and iron were imported from France. Leaving nothing to chance, Francis left money in his will so that his wife's and his own cemetery plots would be weeded and cared for in perpetuity.⁹

Like the Bernards, Claude Bichet and his wife Sophia settled in the valley, but unlike the Bernards, with their rock-solid middle-class background, the

Bichets were from the tradesman class. Claude had served in the French navy for ten years, and later he mastered the wooden shoemaker trade. In his naval career, Claude had visited New Orleans and New York, and in 1868, he had saved enough money to bring his wife and son to America. Traveling with the Bichets were Rosalie Dumartinot, a widow, and her son Joseph. From the New York port where they disembarked, the little group traveled to St. Louis, and it was there, in all likelihood, that Bichet heard about free land in Kansas Territory. The two families, with little knowledge of English, spent the last of their savings outfitting a wagon and span of oxen for the journey to the Cottonwood Valley, and headed for the frontier.

A grandson, Fred Bichet, later wrote, "The first night one of their oxen wandered off or was stolen. They tried to find it but encountered so much difficulty in making themselves understood that they decided to go on with the remaining one. Mr. Bichet tried to adjust the yoke but it hung down and choked the ox. The only solution was for someone to walk beside the ox and carry the other side of the yoke. Mr. and Mrs. Bichet took turns carrying it all the way to the present Bichet farm, a distance of 180 miles."¹⁰ With this determination, the shoemaker-turned-farmer would not be easily intimidated by droughts, floods, or even Indians.

When they arrived in the Cottonwood River valley, the Bichets discovered a large band of Cheyennes camped on land they hoped to settle. Despite rumors that they were hostile, however, the Bichets found them helpful and friendly, and perhaps they were even amused by the French pioneers. The Indians assisted the Bichets in fashioning dugouts on the

bank of the river, and helped them hunt for game and survive their first Kansas winter.

Until 1862 Claude and his family lived in a dirt-floor dugout. Then, he and his son Alphonse built a log cabin near the Bernard home; the original cabin is still part of the present home near Cedar Point. Although he was not a skilled carpenter, Alphonse must have been an artisan, for the walnut fireplace, mantel, and trim he fashioned have endured for over a century.

Alphonse Bichet married an Irish girl, Mary Stewart, whom he brought home to the log cabin before the stone house was finished. Alphonse was a progressive farmer and was active in political matters in Marion County. He and Mary had two daughters and a son, Fred A. After the deaths of Alphonse and Mary, Fred purchased his sisters' share of the farmstead, and today his son, Fred Bichet, Jr., has clear title to the original land patent issued to his great-grandfather Claude. He and his wife, who live in Hutcheson, plan to restore the family home when they retire.¹¹

Bruno Creek, which snakes its way eastward before it spills into the Cottonwood River north of Cedar Point, was named for another early French settler, John Brenot. Little, however, is known about the Brenot family. An oval tombstone in the Cedar Point cemetery reads: "Enfant Brenot--1858." Presumably, the family settled in the French colony shortly after the Bernards. An early Cedar Point settler, O.H. Drinkwater, actually named the creek. In his diary, Mr. Drinkwater wrote that there was a heavy snowfall in the winter of 1862, and "...About the 20th of January buffaloes came in just west of us by the hundreds. C. C. Smith and I killed six on Brenot Creek one day about three miles from its mouth,

on what was known as the George Klein farm. It was not settled then. There was but one settler on the creek then, John Brenot...we called the creek 'Brenot Creek' for this man."¹² By 1865, however, the Brenots had moved away, leaving behind only their name and an infant daughter in the local cemetery.

Francis LaLoge and his partner, Peter Martin, moved to the French colony around 1869. In a biographical sketch about the LaLoge family, a descendant wrote, "...My father left France for America in 1857, arriving in New Orleans. There the men worked in a bakery shop." Looking for something better, Martin accepted a job on a Santa Fe Trail trading post, while Francis LaLoge journeyed west to Pikes Peak, in search of gold. A year later--his money gone--LaLoge walked from Colorado to McPherson County, where he and Martin founded the "French Franks" trading post.¹³ As skirmishes between Indians and white settlers intensified, the opportunity arose to sell their store, and Martin and LaLoge did not hesitate. They were most fortunate--Santana's men burned the trading post the day after it was sold.

Francis LaLoge (who, on one of his trips into Chase County to buy supplies had met--and later married--Mary Hallotte, a French girl) and Peter Martin believed it was in their best interest to move to civilized territory, and so, in 1869 they settled in the "French colony" in Chase County. That year Peter Martin married the widow Dumartinoi, who had come to Chase County with the Bichet family. The Martins settled in Doyle Township, near a creek that would later bear the Martin name. Mrs. Martin died a few years later, in 1872, and was buried in the Cedar Point cemetery. Three years later, Peter Martin sold his farm and left the area. The LaLoges, however,

remained on the Cedar Creek farm the rest of their lives. Francis LaLoge is said to have been one of the first settlers to organize the Bastille Day picnics celebrated on July 14. These festivities, started in 1869, were annual events until the turn of the century.¹⁴ In his somewhat romanticized tale about life in the colony, John Madden wrote, "...the hospitality of the French homes was proverbial throughout the whole valley. The 14th of July, the day of the fall of the Bastille, was generally observed in the New France. Among these families were good violinists and singers, and the stirring music of the Marseillaise could be heard, and the soul of France lived again..."¹⁵

During the American Civil War, the French colony's growth came to a halt, and some of the early pioneers, including the Portrys, Gurers, and Goddards, left Chase County. Others, however, remained, and by the 1870s several French businessmen had become important in the economic affairs of Florence, Marion and Cottonwood Falls.

Gustave Craze and his brother-in-law, Emile Firmin, were two such business leaders. Craze settled in Doyle Township in 1875 and a short time later entered into partnership with Emile Firmin, who had been trained in France as a lawyer. Both men had apparently accumulated some wealth before coming to America, for each purchased large tracts of land west and north of Florence, other tracts near Cedar Point, and additional acreage in western Kansas. Mr. Craze and Mr. Firmin helped finance the Florence Opera House, which was built in 1884. The structure was used for many years--for operas, traveling musical and drama troupes, and by local people for rallies, programs and dances. The original Opera House burned in 1891. Undaunted, the two men had it rebuilt

a short time later, and the building stands today on the corner of Main and Fifth Streets in Florence.

In 1869, Kansas Governor Humphrey appointed Emile Firmin commissioner to the French exhibition in Paris, and as part of his duties, he prepared pamphlets and press releases to entice French people to immigrate to Kansas and the Cottonwood valley. The Craze and Firmin families remained in the Cottonwood valley and engaged in farming, ranching and real estate until 1904, but that year they sold their farms and Hereford cattle at auction and left Florence. Initially, they planned to stay in France for three years, but neither family ever returned to America. Their names, however, are still well-known in Florence. A tract of land incorporated into Florence (south of present Highway 50) is known as the Firmin & Craze addition, and the three-story brick Opera House is one of the town's historical buildings.¹⁶

August and Rosa Ferlet, who were born in Burgundy, came to America just before the Civil War. In 1870, they moved to Kansas and homesteaded near Cedar Point. Unfortunately, soon after they arrived, August was sued by another Frenchman, a Stephen Mareou, over a heifer. The suit dragged through the local court system for three years before a jury decided in favor of Ferlet. By the time it was settled, though, August had had enough of the colony, and he and his family left for Virginia where he taught French for two years. Returning to Chase County later, the Ferlets purchased a hotel in Cottonwood Falls and renamed it the Union Hotel. The two-story inn, on Broadway Street, proved to be a popular stopping place for travelers. The Ferlets ran the hotel until August's death in 1899. Rosa died in 1917, and both are buried in the Prairie Grove

cemetery west of town.¹⁷

Another French settler, Francis Soyez, immigrated to America from Paris. He worked on the Santa Fe Trail as a freighter for many years, and made dozens of trips from Kansas City to Santa Fe. At the close of the Civil War, Francis and his wife settled in Topeka where he worked as a mason on the statehouse. In 1873 the family moved to Doyle Township east of Florence. The Soyez family left a large family, and one of their grandchildren, Emile, lives near Cedar Point on the same farm that his grandfather homesteaded.¹⁸

For the most part, the early settlers of the Cottonwood valley were either farmers or tradesmen of the commoner class. But in 1877, a French nobleman, Comte de Pingre de Guimicourt, arrived in the colony. John Madden described him this way: "Comte de Pingry, a nobleman by birth, and his beautiful comtesse, came to the valley after the Franco-Prussian war...he was of the Royal House of Orleans that could trace its lineage back to Charlemagne..."¹⁹

Although the count was of noble birth, his estate was modest when he visited the colony. At the time of the visit, his son, Louis de Pingre, lived in Florence, but no one seems to remember much about him, and he moved away a short time later. The count, on the other hand, loved the "new France" colony and soon decided to stay. He bought a small farm on Martin creek north of Cedar Point, and in 1877 he married Ernestine de Lobel, a French woman several years his junior.

Although the count may have lived a far different life in France during his long military career—one account mentions that he served in the Crimean War, the Franco-Prussian war, and the French campaigns in North Africa—he

seems to have adjusted well to the life of a farmer-stockman, and later to that of a resident of the humble village of Florence, where he moved in 1884. Although the Comte de Pingre maintained his aristocratic bearing and title, he made many friends in Florence. For example, the *Florence Bulletin* in the 1880s mentioned that the de Pingres hosted many dinner parties and musicals for their friends in Cedar Point, Reading, Emporia and Kansas City.

Comte de Pingre died November 20, 1892, and is buried in the Catholic cemetery west of Florence. His gravestone bears the short inscription, "Victor de Pingre, 1827-1892." His widow married a Florence physician a year later, and after the death of her second husband in 1901, she returned to France.²⁰

The colony was composed entirely of French people from 1857 until 1876, when several Belgian and Swiss families moved to Doyle Township. Because of their common language, the Belgians easily aligned themselves with the French. Brothers August and Joseph LaLouette were born in Belgium, lived in Paris for several years, then immigrated to the United States in 1867. For the next few years both men worked in New York City. It was there that August and Joseph married sisters, Marie and Leonnie Marchat.²¹

Although they had no farming experience, the two couples moved to the Cottonwood valley in 1876 and purchased adjoining farms in Doyle Township. In the year following their arrival, August and Leonnie lost two little daughters, Augustine and Elvirie, aged five and three years old, who are buried in the Cedar Point cemetery beneath small oval gravestones.

The 1870s—with their devastating droughts and grasshopper plagues—were

difficult years, even for experienced farmers. Yet despite their inexperience in agriculture, the LaLouettes were successful. August, in particular, purchased large land holdings in the valley from Cedar Point to Florence. August and Leonnie had two daughters and two sons. Both sons married descendants of French colonists and remained close to the family's original homestead. August died in 1923, his wife in 1929, and both are buried in Cedar Point.²²

In 1882, another early French settler, August Fagard, with his wife Pauline and their three sons, left Paris for New York. The family had heard of the French colony from a Frenchman named Reverend, who owned land in Marion County. Initially, the family settled in Florence where August and his older sons tried to earn a living by working in a stone quarry. Following his wife's death, he filed for a claim on the "uplands" west of Cedar Point. Soon August and a neighbor became locked in litigation over the same quarter section, and, although August eventually won the suit, his spirit seems to have been broken. He and his youngest son Eugene moved to Missouri, leaving the homestead in the care of another son, and a short time later both died of influenza.²³

Paul Fagard, August's second son, married Berthe LaLouette, daughter of Joseph and Marie. Mrs. Mignon Pierce, who was born in 1902, is the only child of that marriage. When Berthe died suddenly in 1909, her widowed mother,

Marie LaLouette, moved in with her son-in-law Paul to help care for young Mignon. Mrs. Pierce lives now on the Fagard homestead near Cedar Point, not far from where her grandfather, Joseph LaLouette, settled. August LaLouette, 80, is another descendant of the Belgian brothers who immigrated to the Cottonwood valley. His father was Ernest LaLouette, who lived on the family homestead until his death, and his mother, Cecilia Soyez, was a direct descendant of two French pioneers, Joseph Soyez and Felix Rosier. Although he never learned to read or write French, he remembers many of the French phrases spoken by his grandparents, and he remembers hearing his grandfather speak of the Bastille Day celebrations.²⁴

Today a few descendants of the French pioneers remain in the Cottonwood valley. Some of them live near the original homesteads.

John Madden concluded his essay about the French colony with the hope that someone will one day write a book and preserve the romance of the "lost colony." He wrote, "There is a wealth of romance to be gleaned out of this lost colony. It is a rich field for someone who can catch the color of the early days of the . . . French pioneers."²⁵

One day perhaps a writer will happen on a country cemetery and will ask "why" the French words on the tombstones? What brought Frenchmen to the river valley? How did they live? A novel begins with questions.

END NOTES

- ¹Alberta Pantel, "History of the French-Speaking Settlement in the Cottonwood Valley, *Kansas Historical Quarterly* (February 1951): 12-49.
- ²John Madden, "The French Colony in Chase County, *Chase County Historical Sketches*, (Emporia: 1940) v. 1; 90. John Madden, a prominent Kansas lawyer, author and politician, lived in Marion and Chase counties from 1865 to 1893. He studied law under Hon. J. Ware Buterfield of Florence and was admitted to the Kansas bar in 1878.
- ³*Ibid.*, 91.
- ⁴Mrs. F. C. Montgomery "Towns and Post Offices of Chase County," *Chase County Historical Sketches*, (Emporia: 1940): 24-25.
- ⁵Pantel, 13.
- ⁶*Ibid.*
- ⁷*Ibid.*, 14.
- ⁸_____ "Francis Bernard," *Chase County Historical Sketches*, (Emporia: 1940): 143-4, and Pantel, 15.
- ⁹Author's research notes of the Cedar Point Cemetery and an anonymous source.
- ¹⁰_____ "Claude Francis Bichet," *Chase County Historical Sketches*, (Emporia: 1940): 145.
- ¹¹Pantel, 16-19. Much of the material on the Bichet family was obtained from a sketch written by Fred Bichet, grandson of Claude Bichet, and later published, in part, by Alberta Pantel in the *Kansas Historical Society Quarterly*, February and May, 1951.
- ¹²Telephone interview by author with Fred Bichet, Jr., great-grandson of Claude Bichet, June, 1989.
- ¹³O. H. Drinkwater, "The Naming of Brenot Creek," *Chase County Historical Sketches*, (Emporia: 1940): 183-6.
- ¹⁴C. F. LaLoge, Jr., "History of C. F. (Francis) LaLoge in Chase County in Early Days," *Chase County Historical Sketches*, (Emporia: 1940): 266-9.
- ¹⁵*Ibid.*
- ¹⁶Madden, 91.

¹⁷Pantel, 37-49.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Madden, 91.

²⁰Pantel, *Kansas Historical Quarterly* (May 1951): 182-86, and author's notes of Catholic cemetery, Florence, Kansas.

²¹Interview with Mignon (Fagard) Pierce by author, Cedar Point, Kansas.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Interview with Mr. and Mrs. August LaLouette by author, June, 1989, Florence, Kansas.

²⁵Madden, 92.