

As a college student, I spent several happy weeks roughly in the area through which the Tour passes today, in the foothills to the west of the Massif Central. The Cyclists have left behind them Monday's brief foray into the Jura Mountains, along the north part of the Swiss border with France, and now they begin in the West. Much of today's region has been devoted to agriculture, much remains heavily forested, all is made up of a profusion of hills and narrow roads.

This part of France served, through history, as a passage from Paris to the southern coast, and as producer of certain agricultural products. Much of it has been settled since the time of the Romans, and driving along one sees massive but crumbling towers and gateways, some which are relics of times past, some of which are very much relevant to day. The many rivers which cut through the region often create deep valleys, and very defensible villages and castles, perched as they are on outcropping far above the river below.

I have happy memories of this area. My college friends, Francoise and Philippe, who have now been married a couple of decades, were natives. They hosted me in country homes, and at their houses in town, so typical of this area of France. My bedroom window in the country looked down upon a pasture and then the river, this village was actually in the valley. To the right was a tiny village church, run-down in a holy sort of way, but from which the Angelus bells would peel at midday and at 6 p.m. (but mercifully not at 6 a.m.). These were not a grand and glorious carillon of bells, but instead a couple of rustic bells, sounding not unlike large cowbells, and obviously rung in the steeple by hand, probably with a rope hanging down below. My friends' family had brought over lawn mowers in their luggage American, unknown at that time in France, for the pasture, so a few times a week, I was reminded of home. Livestock was obviously penned nearby, although I recall not where, but definitely in earshot.

I was invited to a supper in Limoges. As the third or maybe fourth course was served (it was breads, cold meats and cheeses) I had thought I had better fill up on those. I rued that decision quickly, as that was NOT the end of the dinner, but rather just the beginning. Six or seven courses later, or that is three or four hours later, I could barely move when other cold meats and cheeses were served, in preparation for the three dessert courses. Abundant and proper wines were served, of course, with each course.

I caused somewhat of a stir when the Sunday plans were discussed at that dinner. I said I would be happy to do anything, as long as I didn't miss Sunday Mass, somewhere, anywhere. The upshot was that none of them were Mass goers, but it became kind of a special project that I should not miss Mass that Sunday. They were so earnest about it! The host of the meal, my friend's father, explained that as a boy he had served so many Masses, that he felt he was dispensed from any further Sunday obligation. In turn, each felt the need to make their excuses, as they, in turn, mentioned a church near them, and what they thought the Mass schedule was at that Church. Finally, it was decided that I should go to the Saturday evening Mass at the Cathedral, and the available person to take me, a non-Christian, dropped me off in time, and picked me up an hour and a half later.

Sunday found us on an excursion to Uzerche, not too far from today's stage. Someone's grandparents lived there and ran an ancient hotel, which overlooked the river valley, and the main part of the town on the other side. Uzerche has been called "the pearl of Limousin" due to its strategic location in the Limousin region, and indeed in France. An abbey church crowns the town, and the roads curl up the hill toward it. In early medieval times, after one particular defeat, the walls were built, protecting the town and marking it off henceforth as a fort city. Illustrious nobles built castles and lookout towers there, and many of these remain. Other towns which suffered the ravages of the World Wars (such as Limoges) or the Revolution, are much reduced, but Uzerche remains much of its character. When the Saracens, returning from their defeat at the hands of Charles Martel, they besieged the city. After seven years, the villagers were down to their last two cows, which

the mayor promptly fed the remaining food and drove the cows down the road towards the Saracens. Seeing such cows, the hordes withdrew.

That Sunday was a day in the country. We played petanque. We read the newspaper and smoked cigars. We dined on mince and slices of quince, which we ate with a runcible spoon. Oh, wait, that's the wrong story. Actually, we had a repeat of the 12 course meal in town, but rustic style, all prepared by the innkeepers. As we ate the French Fries, the grandparents made sport of Americans for calling them French Fries, "everyone knows they are from Belgium," they said. I caused even more stir when I asked for mayonnaise, Belgian style, for the frites. I said "what's wrong? that's how they eat them in Belgium," and rolling their eyes and chuckling they said "no doubt. In France, though, cold sauces are eaten with cold foods, and warm sauces with warm foods." They gave me the mayonnaise anyway, and watched closely as I broke this culinary law. There was a half platter of French fries left after the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> course (I cannot recall which), and the grandmother, and then the grandfather, and then all present began to encourage me to finish them, since I enjoyed them so much. Finally, my friend Philippe joined in urging me to eat the half platter of fries. "All right," I said, "I will eat them, if Phil eats half." Fortunately, we were both young and svelte, and suffered no consequences, and the nice walk after, through the town, enabled us to feel, once more, right about ourselves.

Enjoy the Tour.

Enjoy the day!





