

U.S. SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS VISIT FRANCE

A group of ten American school administrators with responsibilities for foreign language programs arrived in Paris on October 17, 2006 as part of the French Embassy/*Washington Post*/AATF Fellowship Program. Participants included Greg Barfield, World Languages Coordinator, Fulton County Schools, Atlanta, GA; Sherra Chappelle, Principal, Robert Godard French Immersion and Montessori School, Mitchellville, MD; Brandy Flack, Assistant Principal and Director of Foreign Languages, Richard Allen Schools, Dayton, OH; Mary Ann Folino, Principal, Carl Schurz High School, Chicago, IL; Michael Hydak, Foreign Language Coordinator, Austin Independent School District, TX; Margaret Rose, Foreign Language and English as a Second Language Coordinator, Stafford County Public Schools, Fredericksburg, VA; Patricia Talbert Smith, Head, St. Francis Episcopal Day School, Potomac, MD; Mary Ann Ullrich, Supervisor of Foreign Languages, Arlington Public Schools, VA; Alyssa Villarreal, World Languages Coordinator, Memphis City Schools, TN; and Susan Wrenn, Coordinator of Languages other than English, Lewisville Independent School District, TX. The group was accompanied by Carrie Morse of the *Washington Post*. We were in for a whirlwind eight days of meetings, school visits, cultural activities, and, because this was France, fine dining.

The members of the group arrived by mid-morning, and by 11 a.m. all but one person was there. (He arrived a few hours later due to a delayed flight). I met them in the lobby of the *Hôtel de Wéha*, right off the *Place d'Italie*. Since rooms would not be ready until mid-afternoon, piles of luggage made it on the tiny elevator or were dragged up the winding staircase to the first floor storage room, and we headed across the street to the *Centre commercial* to find lunch.

My objective for the day was to keep everyone awake until their new French bedtime. We returned from lunch to check into the hotel. Before heading to *Notre-Dame*, we stopped at the nearby *FIAP Jean Monnet* where Michel Girardin, AATF Honorary Member, Assistant Director of the FIAP, and Coordinator of the Paris portion of the visit, met us for coffee.

It was a beautiful day, and we enjoyed strolling through the cathedral, spending



Cathédrale d'Amiens

time people watching on the *parvis*, and browsing through the stands of the nearby *bouquinistes* while waiting for our dinner reservation on the *Île St. Louis*.

Shortly before 7 p.m., we headed across the bridge to *Nos Ancêtres les Gaulois*, a charming restaurant where we dined on "Gaulois" fare of pork products, roasted meat, a huge basket of *crudités* on the table, and wine served in *tonneaux*. Several



U.S. administrators with M. Théodet.

people were literally falling asleep in their plates. When at last, the group could no longer keep their eyes open, we returned to the hotel for a good night's sleep before our round of visits.

On Wednesday, we met up with our bus driver, José, the same driver we had in 2005. We began our initiation into the French educational system with a visit to the historic *Lycée Louis-le-Grand*. We were welcomed by *Proviseur* Joël Vallat. Famous graduates of this *lycée* include Voltaire, Molière, and every President of the French Fifth Re-

public except DeGaulle and Mitterrand. Participants were introduced to the concept of *classes préparatoires*. Following a very interesting meeting with the *proviseur*, we were guests of honor at a reception for the school's *assistants*, teaching English, Spanish, German, Hebrew, Russian, and Arabic.

After a delicious lunch of *tartines et salade* at a nearby *bar-restaurant*, we headed for the new *Musée du Quai Branly* which opened in June 2006. Fortunately, our VIP group status allowed us to bypass entrance lines. We discovered, with the help of our guide, a small part of the collection of indigenous art and artifacts from Asia, Africa, Oceania, and the Americas.

The next morning, we were in for an entirely different school visit, the *Lycée Auguste Blanqui* in St. Ouen. St. Ouen, just beyond the *Boulevard périphérique*, was one of the hot spots of the disturbances in Paris during the fall of 2005. It has a large low-income immigrant population with all the social and educational problems that entails.

Principal Henri Théodet met us and was delighted to show us his school. The rapport he showed with his staff and teachers as well as with the students dispelled any negative stereotypes of French administrators that we might have had. He was clearly a principal that any school, French or American,

would be lucky to have. A gourmet lunch served in the teacher's cafeteria provided comparisons between the 20-minute hasty and much-less-appetizing lunches of U.S. high schools.

In the afternoon, we were treated to *Paristory*, a slide show on the history of Paris. The theater is located just near the *Opéra Garnier*, leaving the group in

an ideal location for continued sight-seeing or shopping at the *Galleries Lafayette*.

Friday visits were focused on government agencies. In the morning, we headed for the *Ministère des Affaires étrangères* where we were received by Irène Kirsch, *Chef de bureau des nouveaux publics pour le français et responsable pour les Amériques*. After clearing security, we were joined by Chantal Manès, formerly at the French Embassy in Washington, now *Inspectrice d'anglais* in the *Académie d'Amiens* and AATF Honorary member, who



Château de Chantilly

accompanied us for a two-hour meeting concerning the *Direction du français* whose responsibilities include overseeing language policy for French abroad. After lunch in a quaint Italian restaurant, we proceeded to the *Ministère de l'Éducation*. Marc Rolland, *Sous-direction des Affaires internationales*, *Bureau Amérique*, and Frédéric Bellido provided an overview of the educational system and, specifically, the importance accorded to the teaching of foreign languages from the primary level on.

The effects of lunch had still not worn off, so we had dinner in a small *crêperie* in the Latin Quarter, *La Cour aux crêpes*. The crêpes were delicious, and we were all regaled with the stories of the Nassif brothers who ran the place and their tales of human jumping, three brothers performing at horse shows by jumping the same course as the horses. From that humorous interlude, we headed for the nearby *Église St. Julien le Pauvre*, the oldest church in Paris, built in 1170 on a site used since the 6th century, for a piano concert of the works of Chopin. Afterward, half the group headed off to explore the *Quartier Latin* and the other half headed for the hotel.

Saturday was a free day, and all the participants had plans to visit various parts of Paris. We all met in the evening for a *dîner croisière*. Unlike 2005, this year's cruise was not marred by rain streaming down the glass roof of the boat. We could completely enjoy the monuments of Paris, shining in their spotlights—*Musée d'Orsay*, *Notre-Dame*, *Bibliothèque nationale*, *Conciergerie*, even the replica of the Statue of Liberty. We were joined by Michel Girardin and his wife Paulette Foulem-Girardin, Chantal Manès and her husband Jacques Bonnisseau, and Joël Vallet, Principal of the *Lycée Louis-le-Grand*, and his wife.

Early Sunday morning, we were met by our driver José and loaded our many pounds of luggage onto the bus for the trip to Amiens, via Senlis and Chantilly.

In Senlis, we met Véronique Chabaud,

Délégation académique aux Relations internationales et à la Coopération (DARIC), and our tour guide for a walking tour of the historic old town and the cathedral. The visit of the cathedral was cut short due to the beginning of Sunday mass, and our photographs were somewhat marred by the scaffolding (Is any French cathedral ever completely without scaffolding?), but the centuries of history were

brought to life as we strolled the winding, cobblestone streets.

After another gourmet lunch, we drove to nearby Chantilly. The sun came out as we arrived, and the most energetic among us had time to stroll the beautiful gardens of the *château*. At the end of the afternoon, we gathered to attend the *Musée du cheval vivant* located in the stables of the *château* for the equestrian "Spectacle sur la route de la soie."

After a long day, we arrived in Amiens, checked in and sat down to a late dinner. It was a long, exhausting but fulfilling day.

Monday morning, the sight-seeing was temporarily set aside, and the professional work began again. Much of our time in Amiens was devoted to visiting schools and meeting teachers. We began with a brisk walk across the *Place de la Gare* to the *Rectorat* where we met with *Madame le Recteur Marie-Danièle Champion*. We were honored to be joined by the new American Consul in Lille, Jeffrey Hawkins. As we had been during all our visits, we were surprised at the frankness with which officials were willing to discuss issues of concern to the educational community in both countries. From our meeting, we drove to the *École le Pigeonnier*, an elementary school. We were welcomed by the *Directrice*, and after brief question and response period, divided into groups to visit classes. As usual, the welcome we received was warm and hospitable with coffee and snacks served, or sometimes *apéritif*, so characteristic of France and so foreign to our American ways.

After lunch in the *quartier piéton*, we took time for some shopping, sampling the typical *macarons* of Amiens. We strolled through the streets and shops and ended at the magnificent *Cathédrale Notre-Dame* where the bus was waiting for us.

For the afternoon, our guide was Philippe Simmonds, *DARIC*, a history teacher and Americanophile, who accompanied us to the World War I Museum in Péronne. On the way, we passed literally

dozens of little cemeteries of differing nationalities, each with its rows of neatly arranged crosses. Philippe explained that the whole region was the site of World War I battles where hundreds of thousands of soldiers were wounded or killed. Each little cemetery, and there were over 200 in the Somme department alone, marked the site of a field hospital. The cemetery held the graves of those who had died right on the battlefield. The museum itself was moving, with photos, videos, artifacts, maps, all illustrating the horrors of *la Grande Guerre*.

With a bit of daylight and some time before dinner, Philippe suggested that we go visit the spot where the Battle of the Somme, which lasted nearly five months and inflicted more than 1,000,000 casualties, began. The British had dug under the German trenches and filled the tunnel with dynamite which they blew up on the morning of July 1, 1916. The enormous crater is still visible. By now, the rain which had been threatening all day was pouring down, but several of us braved the wind and rain to look in the crater. It was a sobering sight.

The final day in France was devoted to school visits. Each administrator had been paired with a school in the *Académie*, and the *proviseurs* or their *adjoints* came to the hotel to pick up their charges. Carrie and I remained in Amiens to work, but we met the group at the *Conseil régional* in the evening for a reception. As each administrator arrived and we greeted him or her and the principal, we were met with ear-to-ear grins, exactly the result we had hoped for. After a moment, however, we realized that there were ear-to-ear smiles on the faces of the French administrators as well. When we saw this, we knew the project had been a resounding success.

After dinner at a *crêperie*, we arrived at the hotel where several of us had a final nightcap in the hotel bar to say good-bye to and to thank Chantal and Véronique. We had an early morning departure directly for Charles-de-Gaulle Airport. It had been an eventful, if exhausting, visit. All of the participants went home ardent Francophiles. Even those who were frequent visitors to France had never had such an experience.

Chantal Manès deserves special thanks. The initial idea was hers, and with her help, we found the necessary funding to bring it about with support from the *Washington Post*. She and Michel Girardin were instrumental in organizing the many visits and cultural activities. Véronique Chabaud and Philippe Simmonds were superb hosts and have become fast friends.

Jayne Abrate
Executive Director