

Potsdam Visit Was Learning Experience

Editor's Note: Although the 1978 session of the Institute of American Studies has ended and the SUNY Potsdam campus is now welcoming its regular student body, the memories of the foreign students remain. The following two articles are the last in a series printed by the Courier and Freeman, through which our readers met the foreign students who visited this summer.

BY ANNE SERABIAN

"We think of Americans as people in big cities (New York and Chicago), never in small towns; we think of America in terms of the Grand Canyon and Niagara Falls and cannot imagine you in terms of small houses and isolated farms." Such is the picture of America for most Belgians.

And, Ignace Ingelaere and Dirck Claeys (spelled with a C because his father was so excited when he was born that he spelled his name wrong). Claeys teachers from Belgium, are trying to find out what America and its people are really like. Both men are here on Fulbright grants, and their goal, says Dirck, "is to bring two countries together in a more lasting relationship." Ignace and Dirck are grateful for the opportunity to find out more about the United States. "In Belgium, we can drive for a few hours and be in another country; here we can drive for hours and still be in the same state." Ignace was surprised to find that the country is so huge.

Both men found Americans to be friendly and open. "Your countrymen are much more informal, we dress up with a suit and sometimes a tie; Americans

seem to go everywhere in their cut-off jeans," observed Dirck. "What you have," Ignace related, "we usually get a few years later. And that goes for marijuana and drugs." Both felt that in their country, these problems are just beginning. Alcohol, since everyone can get it easily at any age, is a growing problem there, as it is here.

"Every Belgian is born with a brick in his belly," is a favorite expression in Belgium," Dirck explained. "We have a strong inner need to build something lasting so we build our homes of brick to last for many generations and hope to live... and die in them. We do not move around so much as the Americans."

Americans appear to work harder than Belgians. "When I visit schools in America," Dirck related, "I am surprised that teachers are there during the summer holidays. We would not go to our universities in the summer." Ignace thinks that Americans "always seem busy and cannot sit down with a glass of wine and not be productive. We do not have to be so busy all the time."

On Our Issues
Both teachers stated their high hopes for President Carter. "We thought Carter would bring something new to politics; we are disappointed," Jackie Kennedy was another disappointment to them. They feel that their fellow Belgians respect the memory of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King the most of any Americans their countrymen know. We talked about Watergate and the Vietnam War and the negative feelings that many Europeans feel about these two issues. "However, we were surprised when the press covered the issues in such detail, and we were amazed that you could throw out a President."

The next evening, the two men

brought along a fellow historian, Omer Lavens, and we traveled to Hogsburg (the home of an Indian chief and his wife, Bertha and Erin Oakes, just back from "The Longest Walk" (a delegation that walked from California to Washington, D.C. to meet with Indians from all over the country in hopes that Americans would become more aware of Indian problems. Erin and Bertha seemed quite pleased with the outcome of the Washington meeting, even though the President did not meet with them. "We are very disappointed with President Carter," said Erin. "He was afraid to meet with us. He sent Kennedy, Mondale, Monahan, Javits, but Carter was afraid to come himself. I was surprised at the Belgians' knowledge of the Indians' issues and I got some insights on our vast complicated problem when Ignace talked about the Belgian-Flemish problem which plagues their country. We discussed the Indian dream of not paying any allegiance to any nation other than their own; the many complicated problems that have to do with ownership of the land; treaties; cultural differences; and the Indian's simplistic oneness with nature. At one point in our discussion, Loran Thompson, another Indian chief, spoke of someone who had needlessly killed some sparrows. "What did the birds do wrong? They didn't hurt nobody. They were just doing what birds are supposed to be doing." He was very upset that anyone would want to kill any living thing.

The discussion became emotional since the issues are emotional ones and we left reluctantly at midnight. The Belgians thanked me for the opportunity to learn so much about our country, some of our problems. "It has been a learning experience for us," said Ignace. It had been a great learning experience for me, also.



BELGIAN VISITORS—Belgians Ignace Ingelaere and Dirck Claeys pause on Market Street with their bicycles. The two, in Potsdam this summer as Fulbright Fellows, said that cycling is the most popular sport in Belgium. (Hal Stokes photo).

Flat Land 'Pleasant Change' For Swiss Visitor

While most publicity for the St. Lawrence Valley region brags a bit about its proximity to the Adirondack Mountains, one recent visitor to Potsdam expressed her relief at being "where it's flat for a change."

The visitor was Miss Cornelia Schaffner, an elementary school teacher from Basel, Switzerland, a participant in the American Host Program in Potsdam.

"Where I live is a lot like northern New York," she said. "Lots of mountains, woods, trees. Frankly, I like this flat land of the St. Lawrence Valley. It's a pleasant change from the rugged terrain of the mountains."

Miss Schaffner found some cultural differences during her stay in Potsdam, as well.

"People here are much more relaxed than in Europe. There are fewer 'rules' or restrictions, less strict rules of conduct, less pressure to conform. You're not on such a tight timetable. A person can be himself easier here," she said.

A few nights prior to being interviewed, Miss Schaffner had attended a performance of the musical comedy "Most Happy Felicia" at the Potsdam campus.

"At home I attend many classical music concerts, but this was the first musical comedy I ever attended," she said. "This was fun. I enjoyed the show, but I especially enjoyed the audience. They were so relaxed. So casual. So natural. There was such good rapport between the actors and the audience. You could tell that it was fun for the

players because the audience reacted so well.

"If I go to a performance at home, I tell I must look just so, dress just so. Here it is okay to wear what you want to—even blue jeans," she said.

The American Host program's objectives include giving European teachers opportunities to live with American families and to personally observe what "typical" Americans are really like.

"Europeans have incorrect impressions of American people," Miss Schaffner said, "and even of the country's geography. It is nice to discover that America is not all metropolitan. I spent one day in New York City. It was enough. I really like this area very much."

While in Potsdam, Miss Schaffner lived with David and Ann Evans on the Back Hannawa Road. Asked what she would miss most when she left, she said, "The Evans family, the group (other American Host participants), this area, and all the things I'm learning."

From Potsdam she was scheduled to go to Bolivar (N.Y.) for two weeks and then back to Switzerland just in time to start another school year.

How did the Evanses enjoy having their Swiss houseguest for two weeks? "Cornelia made it easy," Dave said. "She fit right in and was never at a loss for words. It might be more difficult if the person were very quiet and you had to draw him out all the time."

Dave and Ann have had foreign students living with them for short periods before and plan to do so again, but probably not next year, as they are expecting their first baby between now

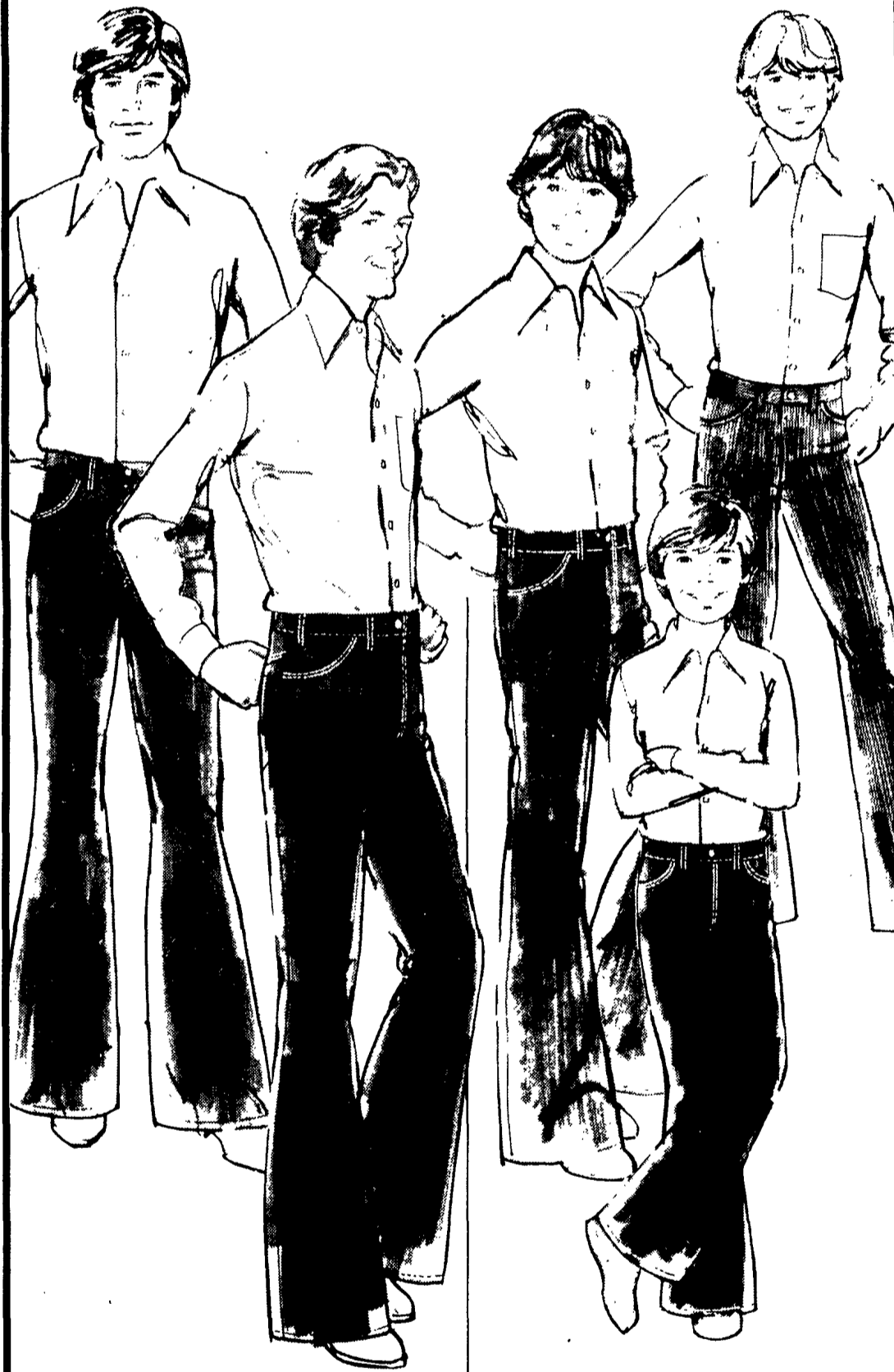


SWISS VISITOR—Cornelia Schaffner with American hosts.

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