

Elaine interviewing Jane Crisler

Jane Crisler: I came to Brittany in 2014. But, I came, really, to pick up the thread of what I had left in 1964, because I came to Brittany in 1964 when I was a high school student, and was just stunned by Brittany. I loved being in France, I loved the language, but I really developed an attachment for Brittany, which is strange, because it is so different from the land that I grew up in.

Elaine Agrell: So, you originally came, I believe for a year, and that's been extended.

Jane: I came for a period of time that had no discernible end. So, when I came, I had sold my house, I had just retired, so I sold my house in Wisconsin, put the contents in storage, and decided that I was going to go to France, and just enjoy it, because I had come many times before, but it had always been for a specific purpose – I either had to do research or I was guiding people, or I was with family or friends, which meant that I was guiding people. So, I wanted to come and just enjoy France at the grassroots level. And so, when I left, people said, “You’re going to be there for how long, Jane?” And, I said, “Well, I’ll be there until I return.” And so, that was the case for six years. Interestingly enough, I realized that if I wanted to stay for more than three months, I had to have a visa, a long-term stay visa. And, to have a long-term stay visa, I needed a permanent address, which meant that my original plan to be a sort of rolling stone for a year wasn’t really possible. So, I did get a permanent address by renting an apartment here in Gouarec. And then I made friends, especially with the President of the AIKB—as it turns out, we have similar interests and we ended up taking some trips together to explore places in Europe and in France. And then I made friends and got involved in activities here, so, yes, it was just very pleasant and I saw no particular reason to do anything else. No need to go back.

Elaine: You’ve become extremely involved, obviously, with AIKB, also with Bon Repos. What have you been doing with Bon Repos?

Jane: I became interested in Bon Repos, obviously because it's a historic monument, and my field is French history, and I was particularly intrigued by the exhibition on canals. And, I heard the president talk about what all had happened in their planning meeting for that exhibition, and I had a little pang of regret, because as an ex-university professor, I realized that is what I missed: sitting around the table, debating a text and what was going to be presented to the public. And, at the same time, I have become more interested in museums—in museums as a place of education. It's a very distinct pedagogy that takes place, that's needed for a museum. It's a one-time opportunity to really seize a visitor, to get them more interested in history. So, I thought, "How can I become involved in that?" And, I realised that I could offer to translate the text of the exhibit, which would be a service to the Abbey for its season. There are many anglophone people who come here. And then secondly, it would serve something that is a pleasure to me, which is to explore both the French and the English languages.

Elaine: It does seem to me in the time I've been here that it has come alive, there's a lot more going on.

Jane: Well, I know that's the goal of the director of the Abbey, Estelle Salaün, because she really wants to see the Abbey here as a cultural centre, a place that isn't just "old stones," as everyone says, but actually a vibrant place that brings together people from very many backgrounds.

Elaine: Now imagine you've got a little box to put—your memory box—and you're going to put into it some of your particular memories of your time here. What would you say your favourite place was?

Jane: Well, my favourite place remains, a place that actually I haven't been able to visit as much as I might like, and that's the northern coast of Brittany. So, this is an odd thing to say, living here in Central Brittany, and Central

Brittany certainly has been the great discovery for me, that's one of the reasons why I did that presentation on the linen trade—I knew nothing about that when

I came before, I'm embarrassed to say—but, I grew up in the American Midwest. I was born in northern Indiana, where the land is absolutely flat. It's a land where you see corn fields or soybean fields to the horizon. And, when I came to Brittany as a teenager, we came to St. Brieuc and so we explored primarily the coastline there, the landscape there is just stunning. Absolutely stunning. And I remember seeing heather for the first time, because I had just read about heather in romantic novels. I didn't realise that it really existed.

Elaine: And what about maybe a particularly outstanding meal, something that you've eaten here that you think, "Wow, I really would like that again," or that was good or ...

Jane: The one thing that's been in my taste buds for more than 50 years is crêpes. I really discovered the crêpe made with blé noir—the galette—so of course going to a crêperie is always a pleasure. People live so close to the land, they have an intimate relationship with it. We always think about that in terms of vegetables, certainly in terms of eating artichauts, but then also understanding the culture of les chasseurs, of hunters. I knew people in my own family who were hunters in the States, but it was a very different thing. Here, the relationship of the hunter to the game is much more intimate and, I would say, intellectual. So, all that being the case, having been invited to les repas de chasseur, hunters who are gathering for their meal, has been a great privilege. So it could be a sort of pâté of woodcock, that the hunters themselves make in one day that is as much entertainment as food production, then also, of course, the deer, the venison that comes with that. And, as is usually the case in France, the meal lasts a long time. That means that people tell stories. And, there have been many cases when I have wished that I had your equipment there, to record the stories. That has been something that is just precious, and I could not have had that if I hadn't lived here. Part of my reason for coming here was a bit of a po-

litical escape, an escape from the political environment of the States, which, of course begs the question, “Why are you going back?”, but what I found here, is that the discussion is always about food—what you’re eating, where it came from, how it was prepared, what ingredients are in there. It’s an incredible ap

preciation of not just the food that you’re eating, but of the world that provides the food.

Elaine: So, finally, Jane, one word that you could use to sum up your sort of overall impression of living here.

Jane: Yes, it comes from a woman, a very exuberant woman, that I remember her coming into the swimming pool one day and she was talking about being late, but it was due to “la convivialité”, so it came through the friendship that people have and that unspoken assumption and need to nourish those friendships through conversation at the bakery, it’s never just a quick trip, or a conversation at the swimming pool, or a conversation when you’re going through the check-out line at the supermarket. The question is not efficiency, as we think of in our Anglo-Saxon cultures, but rather this is the glue of the society, and this is what keeps it going.

Elaine: We wish you the very best of luck. Bon voyage.

Jane: A la prochaine fois.