

Thurs., Aug. 1, 1985



IOWA BOY

A small town says 'Bonjour'

When you get a letter from the mayor and city council of Woolstock, Ia., that begins with "Bonjour," you sit up and take notice.

Yes, Mayor Louis Abbas and his 235 townsfolk in the north-central Iowa farming community are exercising their French connection for the next couple of weeks. They are hosting 19 visitors from their sister city of Ban-de-La-Roche, France.

Woolstock is the town that is familiar as "the birthplace of Superman," owing to the fact that George Reeves, the late actor who played the man of steel in the old TV serial, was born there a half-century ago.

But I didn't know the town had a charming, cosmopolitan story to share until just this week.

It seems the area was settled by French immigrants in the late 1800s and that, seeking to build a church, they solicited money from their relatives overseas.

"The French Church," as it is known, was completed in 1896 on a plot 5 miles east of town. Fifteen years ago, a tornado moved it two feet off its foundation and toppled its steeple, but it has been restored.

Among the French people who moved to Woolstock in the decades after its founding is one Laurent "Frenchy" Grandgeorge, who grew up on a farm and now lives in Eagle Grove.

He had been born in Ban-de-La-Roche and, about five years ago, had some cousins who still live there come visit him in his Iowa home.

Conversations among them led to the idea of Woolstock and the French community, which is really a collection of seven tiny villages operating under one municipal government, becoming sister cities.

Documents were signed in 1983, and last summer a delegation of 29 Woolstockers went to France to pay their

Des Moines airport at 11 o'clock Monday night, and they were really impressed when we had a crowd of about 50 people out there with signs to meet them," said Mayor Abbas. "Then we loaded up and headed for Woolstock. By the time we got here, it was about 1:30 in the morning, but we had a whole bunch of local people turn out at the community building to welcome them and have soup and sandwiches."

After resting throughout the day Tuesday, the visitors were to be taken to the Wright County Fair in Eagle Grove Tuesday night, kicking off two weeks of trips to various attractions in Iowa — including stops at the West Bend Grotto, Fort Dodge's Fort Museum, Stanhope's Watermelon Days celebration, Des Moines and the Amana Colonies.

This weekend has been reserved for the City of Woolstock to say its official "Bonjour."

On Saturday, a parade will be held in honor of the French at 11 a.m., followed by ball games and horseshoe pitching in the afternoon and a pig roast at night.

On Sunday, there will be a ceremony at the French Church cemetery, where Pierre Moll, mayor of Ban-de-La-Roche, will place a tri-color wreath in memory of World War veterans who fought for the Allies, followed by a 10:30 service in the church. The city government is sponsoring a potluck picnic in the Woolstock park at 12:30 p.m., followed by a 2 p.m. program at which Lt. Gov. Bob Anderson and Congressman Jim Ross Lightfoot will speak.

One neat touch the Woolstock hosts are putting on their guests' itinerary is a typical Iowa wedding. It worked out that one of Frenchy Grandgeorge's relatives, Bob Grandgeorge, of Woolstock, is marrying Camilla Knutson, of Eagle Grove, on Aug. 10. The visitors are being invited to the wedding at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Eagle Grove in the afternoon and to the reception and wedding dance to be held that night in Woolstock.

Abbas said the town government, in planning and paying for the visitors' entertainment, has received help from a number of civic organizations, chief among them the 94-member Woolstock Ban-de-La-Roche Club, which sprang up after the sister cities agreement was signed.

"It's quite an undertaking for a town this size," he said, "but we're making it fun, and we've had an awful lot of cooperation. We're doing everything we can to make these people feel welcome."

He said language will occasionally be a problem, but there are enough people around the area who can speak French so that interpreters will always be present.

As for himself, "all I know right now is 'Bonjour'" but he said he is working on his "Au revoir," too, and expects to have it ready when it's time to say farewell to the French on Aug. 13.

— Chuck Offenburger