



Pierre Moll, mayor of Woolstock's sister city of Ban-de-la-Roche, France, explains the meaning of the wreath the

French presented to Woolstock American Legion members, left. Some of the Frenchmen, right, stand at attention.

## They don't *parlez francais* here, but their heritage sure does

By TOM O'DONNELL

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WOOLSTOCK, IA. — Unlike their French counterparts, the residents of this town of about 235 are more likely to eat a cinnamon roll than a croissant, and drink beer or soda with dinner rather than wine.

In fact, Woolstock residents and their French friends agree little similarity remains in their life styles. But they do share something — a common heritage.

They marked that heritage Sunday at the French Church, which the area's settlers built in 1896 with the monetary aid of their relatives in France. Joining the celebration were 19 visitors from Ban-de-La-Roche, France, many of them related to Woolstock residents.

"At some point or another, either distantly or presently, there's some relation" between the people of Ban-de-La-Roche and Woolstock," Pierre Moll, mayor of Ban-de-La-Roche, said through interpreter Reine "Frenchie" Beletti of Fort Dodge.

### Came Here as Children

Beletti and her brother, Laurent "Frenchy" Grandgeorge of Eagle Grove, moved to the Woolstock area from Ban-de-La-Roche as children. Several of their relatives were among the French people making the trip.

"When I came over here, you could walk down the streets of Woolstock and speak French" with most passers-by, Grandgeorge, 51, said. He arrived in the United States in 1949, when many first-generation French still were living in the area. Children often couldn't speak English when they started school, more than 50 years after the first French people settled in the area in the 1890s, he said.

That strong French influence is weakening, Grandgeorge said.

"Now, you don't hear anybody speaking French," he said.

"We hope to bring it back to life. The way it looks now, we're bringing it back to life."

### Wreath Laid

Before the service at the church four miles east of Woolstock, Moll and several other visitors, wearing traditional French garb, laid a wreath at the church cemetery honoring the war dead.

"In laying down this wreath we pay tribute to men who laid down their lives to help us recover our lost liberties," Moll said. Throughout the cemetery the names showed the strong French influence: Grandgeorge, Caquelin, Hilpiper, Claude and Loux. Many stones bear inscriptions in French.

Grandgeorge said the French settled the area to escape overcrowding and to seek their fortune.

Ban-de-La-Roche "was overpopulated, and times were awful hard. Most of the young, they were trying to make their fortune," he said.

### Fertile Soil, Cheap Land

Some French settled in LaSalle County, Ill., before coming to the Woolstock area, Grandgeorge said. They were attracted to the area by the fertile soil and cheap land, he said. The first few arrived and quickly sent for relatives.

"That's how my folks got over here," Grandgeorge said.

Moll said Ban-de-La-Roche, actually a group of seven mountain villages under a common government, has a population of about 5,000. "It's a very poor part of the country," he said. For years residents lived off the land, raising cattle, hogs and a few crops such as potatoes.

Iowans, he said, are "easy-going," not like most French people, who are more formal.

The visitors have been touring Iowa, and later this week will visit Des Moines and the Amana Colonies.

