

## SAMPIGNY CHEMICAL DEPOT, FRANCE 1953

Written by Frederic Harrell, US Army dependent

The trip began in a small town in South Georgia, took us to Fort Hamilton, New York, and a quick trip across the Atlantic on the *SS United States* to Le Harve, France. A train ride from Le Harve to Paris to Lerouville, France, with the final miles in a 3/4-ton Army ambulance that doubled as a school bus brought me to the first time I saw Sampigny Chemical Depot. I was seven years old. Five other Army dependents and I were dropped off in front of the squatty tin school building not far inside the main gate just to the east of the parade field.

I was in the second grade and leaving the warmth of my grandparent's farm was not where I really wanted to be. Six of us comprised the second grade class and for the first time in my life, I was going to school with "colored" kids. The teacher introduced me to the room and any apprehension I may have felt was quickly put to rest. Kids being kids, they greeted me warmly, inundated me with questions only to be quickly shushed by the teacher. The second grade was in a room with first and third graders and the teacher had her hands full.

A couple of things that struck my 7-year old mind were the fact that there was no playground equipment on the playground and the playground was covered with fist sized rocks. No one ever said why there was no playground equipment. However, it didn't take me long to learn that the rocks were there to keep the mud at a minimum. Any place that wasn't rocked soon turned to mud if it got much traffic.

Playground equipment was only one of the amenities the school lacked. Like the tent barracks that housed the hundred or so GIs, potbelly stoves heated the school. Instead of coal, the school stoves were fuel-fired -- probably diesel. The school library was about the size of a large walk-in closet with a limited selection of well-worn books. We had a wooden latrine about 50 or 100 feet from the school. With heat only on the Girl's side, the boys had to suffer the cold. There was no cafeteria at the school. At the appointed hour, teachers lined us up for the walk to the snack bar for lunch. Nope, we didn't get our choice of hamburgers. We got cooked cauliflower, peas, or an assortment of vegetables, and a strange tasting meat that I learned later was horse.

Thanksgiving was definitely a first-class and an extended family affair at this small outpost. I remember being decked out in my "Sunday" clothes and having to wear a bowtie -- which I hated -- and shoes that I was not allowed to play in. Women and girls wore "special occasion" dresses and our fathers and other soldiers wore coats and ties or Class-As.

The mess hall was a festive affair at Thanksgiving. The cooks and KPs, dressed in clean and pressed whites, served dinner to officers, NCOs and enlisted men and their families. (I found a Sampigny Thanksgiving program when I was going through my parent's effects.) From what I can remember, everything was free on Thanksgiving; including the matinee at the theater -- normally five cents for kids. After the movie, we went up the hill to the EM club and everything was free there as well. At least everything served to kids!

The school was small with barely enough room for three classrooms. The post theater doubled as a location for school assemblies and USO shows. Long before it was not PC to mix school and religion, teachers recruited kids into an assortment of parts for the Christmas pageant; with parts assigned based on age and height. After the Christmas pageant (usually held on the Saturday night before Christmas) Santa "ho, ho, ho'd" his way down to the stage from the back of the theater and handed out Christmas candy and presents to all the kids.

I must have been eight or nine when another kid and I confirmed that sometimes Santa sent in a substitute to stand in for him. We were in the latrine behind the theater when Santa came bounding in. He didn't say much, but was probably surprised to find us there. We recognized him immediately as Sweeney from the motor pool (he ran the wrecker and other heavy equipment).

He pulled his beard down and said in his toughest voice, "you guys better not say a word about this to the little kids." And we didn't.

There was no dependent housing at Sampigny. For the first two years, we lived in a little town about halfway between Sampigny and Commercy, Lerouville. My sister and I were the only American kids in town and we both learned to speak French fast. We rode to school in the ambulance or, as the dependent population grew, in the back of a deuce and a half with a row of benches down the middle. Sometime in 1955, we moved to St. Mihiel, where we lived next door so Sgt. Bennet and his family and we finally got to take a real school bus to school!

I have a litany of photos (mostly of family trips and kid parties) of Sampigny. However, in the mix there are a few photos of GIs my father worked with. I remember two PFCs (Robineau (?) and one called "Little Barrel") who visited us on a number of occasions. Although it has been over six decades since our stay at Sampigny, reading about the post definitely jogged my memory. The Army then seemed a little different from the one I served in between 1964 and 1967. I believe that the career soldiers (most having served in at least WWII and Korea) either accepted fraternization or ignored any rules about it. Possibly, the kids brought the families of different ranks together. Certainly, as the Army carried out the order to integrate, I cannot remember one incident in school or out, where there was an issue with kids over race. We "sir'd" and "mam'd" anyone older than we were, regardless of race or rank.

Perhaps it's because we went to school together and the place was so small that brings the names back so easily. I remember that Col. Campbell was the post commander and here are a few more that I remember because I went to school with their kids or my parents played pinochle with them. Sgt. Champion was the mess sergeant. I'm not sure what Sgt. Bennett did, however, I remember a Sgt. Watrus (he may have been the 1<sup>st</sup> Sgt.), there was a Capt. Ferguson, a Maj. Odechowski, a Sgt. Vondertann, and a Sgt. Heard. I remember a Sgt. Robinson whom I asked if he had an extra unit patch from either his WWII or Korean War service and once he learned that I collected patches, he routinely got them for me.

By the school year of 1955, a new school was built – with playground equipment! The old school became the chapel and a library. The streets were never paved. However, I believe they did upgrade the theater about the same time they built the four-lane bowling alley, and the new school. I learned to bowl at the alley and was disappointed that I wasn't old enough to set pins!

There was a bar in Sampigny and I believe our fathers called it the "snake pit." Being from South Georgia and deathly afraid of snakes, I could only envision a pit full of the biggest Georgia rattlers and wondered why anyone would go there to drink!

While stationed in Germany from 1964 until 1967, I returned to visit our former landlady and her family in Lerouville. By 1966, the French government had asked the U.S. military to vacate France. Any sign that Sampigny has once been home to a chemical depot were not evident and it must have looked like it did at the end of WWI -- a French cavalry post, minus the horses.

Strangely enough, while stationed in Germany, our unit (4<sup>th</sup> Bn. 41<sup>st</sup> FA-- Pershing missiles) received some of the salvage from the transfer of assets from France. House trailers for our field position and library books for our day room are a couple of items that come to mind.

For a long time, my parents stayed in touch with the friends they made while at Sampigny. However, other than what they told me about the families they knew, I have yet to cross paths with any of the kids I went to school with there. While working in the oil field in Louisiana, I did, however, learn that a co-worker (Riley Penson) had been stationed at Sampigny during some of the time my father was stationed there.

All told, my father was stationed at Sampigny from about May 1953 until April 1956. He was assigned to the motor pool. After Sampigny, he was transferred to the Quartermaster School at Fort Lee, Virginia, where he was an instructor. And coincidentally, the soldier who played Santa for the kids was now a SP5 and stationed at Fort Lee too.

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Other than the photos and memories the Sampigny article helped stir, I only have one souvenir of the time we were stationed at Sampigny. A WWI U.S. Army bayonet that I found in a corner of our basement in St. Michiel. I'm not sure why my father allowed me to keep it, but he did and it's on my mantelpiece as a reminder the time we were stationed at Sampigny Chemical Depot.

