

1997

## Les Voix Voices Newsletter

Franco-American Women's Institute

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# LES VOIX-VOICES

## FELICITATIONS

### MADELEINE GIGUERE

by Rhea Cote

The following is the text of the presentation of Madeleine Giguere as a Maryann Hartman Awardee.

Things have a way of coming full circle. I'm convinced of it. For me the beginning of my awareness of Madeleine Giguere's work started in September of 1986 when I was newly hired as editor-in-chief for "Le Forum." I was introduced to the work which Madeleine Giguere had been doing since the early 70's with the U.S. census and effecting change for the Franco-Americans of the state of Maine. Madeleine determined her course of work of tracking the French in the U.S. census because she believed that numbers do open avenues for other kinds of change to take place. The Maryann Hartman Award is, among many things, presented to pioneers and pathfinders. Madeleine is a pioneer and a pathfinder.

As a Franco-American woman, on my journey of re-discovering my culture, I have been influenced by Madeleine's work as well as her presence and support in my work. Mostly, because she took me seriously in my efforts. That can be daunting. For the times I had been asked to present to her classes or to serve on a panel of Franco-American women at USM with her, I have found myself listening or watching her and her example. Madeleine causes us to think in ways which begin at the beginning. Her attention to detail is how it all begins.

Her belief in her work with the U.S. census has carried her through three decades of persistence and advocacy. She believes in the power of numbers. She believes that it makes a difference, in how we are treated and how we feel about ourselves, to know our collective ancestry. In 1986, Madeleine was calling others to action to sensitize the members of Congress to the importance of including in the 1990's census the question of, "What is your ancestry?". With the inclusion of such a question, along with the language question, in the census, the government and other institutions could be made more

aware of the Franco-American's needs and strengths. Without the inclusion of the ancestry question, cultural groups such as the Franco-Americans could be seen as a much smaller group if the census taking would be limited only to the language question. As an organizing tool, having a visible and viable presence on the national level, increases and enhances the possibilities for Franco-Americans to be seen as a political body. This continues to be true, both for the private and public sectors as attested in a front page, 1993 USA Today story, featuring the Census Report on language identifying French speakers as the second largest language group in the U.S.

In addition to her census work, Madeleine was a driving force in the state's institutions as a published voice, advocate, organizer, and participant as well as an avid supporter of many other's efforts in the work done on behalf of the Franco-Americans of the state of Maine.

Among her early writings, was a letter she wrote in the early 70's to the Chancellor on the disadvantage of Franco-Americans in the University of Maine System. Many of her scholarly published works provide a baseline upon which other publications were made possible.

Madeleine's contribution to the Franco-Americans and others is immeasurable in terms of ensuring the future of this cultural group's impact on the state and elsewhere. Madeleine is a native of Lewiston, Maine. She earned her B.A. in Social Studies at the College of New Rochelle, her M.A. in Economics at Fordham University and her M. Philosophy in Sociology at Columbia University. She holds an Honorary Doctorate in Franco-American Studies from Rhode Island College.

Before she retired six years ago, she was a Professor Emerita in the USM Sociology Department. She, along with her colleagues, was instrumental in organizing

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## My Voice

Lanette Landry Petrie - Co-Editor

Well, "les Voix/ Voices" survived its initial introduction to the world, as defined by FAWI. It has good reviews as far as I can tell so here we go again, daring to risk.

My FAWI apprenticeship began about ten years ago when I literally moved in the backyard of the Franco American Center at UMaine. The office I work in was located in what was the former Newman Center complex on campus. The Franco-American Center was in the rectory and my department office, in space over the garage. It's in a pretty isolated part of campus so as an extreme extrovert, I found myself very lonely. Rhea Côté Robbins was working at the Center at the time so I called out to her one day and suggested we have lunch and maybe she could help me reclaim my French. That association with Rhea and the Center was the beginning of a reclamation of my Franco-American culture and identity. We talked and dreamed about what it would be like to feel empowered as women, Franco women, UMaine women employees and if and how we could include others in this empowerment. Rhea was given the vision of what was possible. As we talked, and dreamed, and laughed, and cried, our friendship developed and deepened. She was bold in her dreaming and I was scared; she taught and I learned; she challenged and I grew; we hurt and we healed. Together we fought many dragons--on the UMaine campus and in the Franco male environment. Sometimes it has been necessary to go around instead of straight through but continue we did. When one got tired the other was energized. When one was discouraged the other prayed. We came together with our husbands and our Church. In all of these years Rhea's vision for other Franco-American women has never waned. This particular configuration of FAWI is the most powerful and exciting yet but is in no way the end of the vision. The vision continues to define and redefine itself ever widening its scope to be more inclusive. With Rhea's courage and my ability to love we are realizing the dream of being empowered women and empowering others.

### INCLUSIVE & INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE IN PORTLAND, MAINE

September 11 through 13, 1997

Amy Bouchard Morin and Bonita Parent Grindle

Seven FAWI women left for Portland before the sun's rays broke the horizon on Thursday morning. The Old Town contingent met up with Rhea, et. al. at the rest stop in Hampden and then "flew by car" to Portland. We arrived in time to register, have breakfast, and hear the opening address by Paula Rothenberg, director for the New Jersey Project. After reviewing the concurrent programs, the group broke up and attended morning sessions of individual interest. We gathered again for lunch and then checked into our rooms.

The first of the Franco sessions focused on "The History, Geography, and Presence of Franco-American Women". Rhea Cote Robbins was the moderator and did an excellent job presenting the Grace Metalious critique. She also shared information about the FAWI group. Yvonne Mazarolle's presentation about Evangeline was informative and interesting. Barbara Ouellette's slides and story of her learning experience while copying her *Memere's* quilt with her mother, as well as Deborah Small's slide show and talk about the women's life experiences in their family was fascinating and presented the "life and times" of Franco women in the early part of this century and the connections with today's Franco-American women. After a short break we went to a presentation at the Museum which we soon discovered had standing room only. Tired and hungry we then returned to the hotel, and the decision was made to eat dinner at the hotel restaurant.

The second group of Franco women presented Friday morning. Kristin Langellier was the moderator for the session which focused on Franco-American Voices in the New Curriculum. Kristen gave the introduction for the Franco-American women and provided a rich landscape for the presenters who followed. Lanette Landry Petrie gave a slide presentation of "My Mother's Walls" which showed the art present in the typical Franco home. Amy Bouchard Morin presented slides of the women's hand work done in her family and in France and gave examples of how these skills could be taught in schools so that they would not be lost to future generations. Bonita Parent

(Continued on page 3)

## POET'S CORNER

Pain of the years rising  
And falling like the ocean tide  
Ebbings and flowings  
Oozing through the cracks of  
My mind  
As the water oozes through  
The Rocks  
Then receding and exposing  
Fully what lies beneath.  
In the reality of time  
The formations  
True extensions of  
Rocks and cracks  
Of hidden truths,  
Lies,  
And betrayals  
The pounding and erosions  
Leaving Distortions  
And various patterns  
Of sharpness and smoothness  
Left gleaming in the sun  
Shining,  
Fully exposed for others to see  
The beauty of her  
After the washing,  
After the cleansing.  
Y. Mazerolle

### Inclusive & Interdisciplinary (continued from page 1)

Grindle read a story she had written about a quilt made in France and passed down through generations of women (to Canada and into the U.S.). After both the previous day's and this morning's presentations, many comments were made to the FAWI group regarding the need to publish the information generated by the FAWI.

Friday afternoon, we took a moment to relax. It was a beautiful warm, sunny day and we enjoyed a walking-tour of the shopping district in The Old Port. As we entered one particular shop which was stocked with earthy incense, mystical music, magical rocks, and shelves of books pointing out the many paths in life, the shop owner came to greet us and inquired if we were together. We informed her that we had just finished presenting at a conference. Her reply was: "Well I never felt such a rush of positive energy as when you women came through the door." We just gave a knowing smile.

Returning from Portland, Rhea's car quickly disappeared from the sight of the Old Town contingent. The ride home was rainy and quiet--well sort of. Amy played a number of Quebecois/Franco Cds and we hummed and tapped our feet all the way home.. It was a nice way of coming down after all of the excitement. In Waterville, we joined up with Rhea's group for the last meal of this trip and conversation before going our separate ways. Barbara was disturbed by the squeaking of the kitchen door in the restaurant, so one of the employees was sent out to buy a can of oil.

Overall, this was an excellent conference. And it was successful in its mission to provide opportunities for networking and exchanging information to promote a more inclusive curriculum. One drawback related to the conference was that too many panels were offered in each time slot making it difficult to choose which to attend. With so many choices available, attendance at any given workshop was lowered and proved to be a source of disappointment for many.



# Tickling the Past

"Maman always said I was Saturday's child," my mother said, smoothing the page with the poem opening Rhea's novel, *Wednesday's Child*. Saturday's child works hard for a living. Like her mother before her, my mother, Lenore Provost Langellier, worked hard for a living, first as an Illinois farmer's wife raising ten children. Then in her 50's, after my father became blind, she got her high school diploma and a year of training to work as a licensed practical nurse until retirement. She still works hard, of course. Humble by nature and Franco-American culture, she says with a laugh that at 77 there's a few things she can't do but she can work circles around people half her age. And that's no joke. Recently, she visited me in Maine, her first trip out since my dad, her husband of 56 years, died last October. We talked about her childhood, and as I listened, I wondered "Which child am I?" looking for resemblances not just between her and me but also between the Midwest Franco-American experience and what I've learned through my FAWI femmes about Franco-American women in Maine.

Because it was her birthday, I asked her if she had any parties when she was a little girl. "Only one", she replied, shared with her sister, Dorene. My mother was born July 31, 1920, the second of seven children and the oldest daughter, to Nelda Bouchard and Lawrence Provost in St. George, Illinois, the name conferred by the Catholic church centering the town. Families were close, and mother described how her mother hosted one dinner after another for relatives throughout the year. The legacy of food and visiting survives today, embodied in the Cousins Club. The cousins of the club, no boys allowed, are women related through their mothers, the Bouchard sisters. They have been meeting continuously each month since 1961. In the earlier years they rotated among their homes for a meal and card-playing, but more recently they go to a restaurant to eat and then adjourn to a cousin's house for some 500 (a version of euchre), but mostly for fun and talk. My mother and Dorene

By Kristin M. Langellier

joined the club about fifteen years ago, when my mother retired from nursing. In the last few years, Aunt Myrtle, the last surviving member of the twelve Bouchard children, joined, sharing family history with her nieces.

My mother doesn't know where either the Bouchards or the Provosts came from in Canada nor exactly how they got to French settlements like St. George, Bourbonnais, St. Anne, in Illinois. But it's certain they were French. As a child, my mother learned her prayers in French, later to be relearned in English. Her parents were bilingual, speaking both languages at home, but reverting animatedly to French whenever they dropped in to see *Memere* LeSage in Kankakee. Although opportunities to converse declined, "Maman never lost her French," my mother told me.

Wintering in Florida in their later years, her parents met another elderly French couple. Her mother corresponded with this woman, translating her letters aloud for my mother to enjoy. The expression that my mother recalls most vividly is *ferme ta bouche*, as when Cousin Toni says, "I'm gonna tell you just like my mother told us: -*ferme ta bouche*." It survives among the grandchildren today, transformed to a private family language and testimony to our roots.

Papa Provost bought a farm near St. George in 1917 or 1918, my mother recalls. Aunt Regina and Uncle Gene Granger lived on the farm one mile north, Aunt Delia and Uncle George Dupuis on the farm one mile south, and the three families "did everything together:" butcherings, barbering, and birthing babies.

My mother describes a father who was frugal, shrewd, and hard-working, and the only one to keep his farm during the losses of the Depression. "We just had the necessities, but others in the family lived

higher than us," she commented. Papa predicted, "-they're gonna lose their farms -- and they did," the last phrase set off, the last word stressed to avoid any mistake about the moral of the story. Family lesson learned and passed on.

During the Depression years, the collector appeared at the farm once a year. While Grandma and the children watched from the house (in a scene I imagine from Steinbeck), Papa met him in his car and got in to "do some fast talking". Somehow Papa managed to raise the \$800 interest due each year, but it was only at the end of World War II that he paid the farm off, paving the way for a modest prosperity and the purchase of "one farm after another."

The Depression years were difficult, but the family never went hungry. "Maman always canned everything; vegetables, fruit, and meat." The winter activities of butchering and canning meat took days of work, shared by women and men. First came the *boudin* (blood sausage), later the head cheese (*fromage de tete*), and last, the cracklings rendered from the lard, what my mother calls *grattons* and what we call *creton* in Maine - a pork spread for bread.

My mother remembers canning tomatoes one long day, Grandma seated, particularly tired with a leg aching from varicose veins, when a jar burst, spilling the steaming tomatoes onto her lap and burning her leg. On another canning day Grandma asked my nine-year-old mother and Dorene to fill the cob basket from the shed to fuel the fire under the processing tomatoes. The little girls decided to count all the cobs in the basket, totally absorbed, their chore forgotten, until Grandma came to find out why her tomatoes weren't cooking.

I remember Grandma Provost as an affable but no-nonsense woman with whom my

sister Celeste and I spent a week, the summers around age ten, when she reprimanded my kitchen floor sweeping. "You're just tickling it," she said, showing me the correct technique, briskly stabbing at the floor with the broom.

When another baby was coming, Papa would go get Aunt Regina in the buggy. Midwife to the family, Aunt Regina came early and stayed a week or more with each birth. No prenatal care in those days, Grandma would simply stop by the doctor's office in Kankakee about a month before to tell him he'd have to come out again. Such was the routine of the birth my mother remembers first and most well. But this baby was breech and "the doctor came too late," my mother cryptically explained, describing how the infant's arms flapped as she suffocated. At school, my mother and the siblings saw Papa go by in the buggy, with a little white box in the back, so they suspected the tragedy before they got home. My mother repeats how badly Grandma felt, to lose a "perfectly healthy" baby girl. As was custom, they had the wake at home in the parlor, surrounded by family.

Many of my images of my mother and my grandmother envision them at work, but my mother recalled the fun times, too. The oldest four children, for example, sang with their parents. "We sang in different parts I want you to know, and not just at home but for school and local programs," my mother's knees rocking from nervousness. I imagine them as the Von Provost Family Singers.

After shelling, a room in the corn crib became a playhouse with large boxes made into a piano. Summer nights, when the cousins came over to get their hair cut by Grandpa, all the kids played hide and seek, scampering like squirrels up the crib walls with their bare toes wedged between the slats, laughing and calling in the darkness.

Although there was a Catholic school at St. George parish, the children walked to the one-room country school, taught by Mrs. Beauclair from Bourbonnais, except on bad days when Grandpa picked up all the kids on the road in his Klondike buggy with the windshield.

Catholic education consisted solely of preparation for the sacraments. Still, religion ordered their lives; "we were all one thing," my mother comments, meaning Catholic. Sunday was often the only day they "got out," and the church was the social center with its dances and annual homecomings.

As for education, "Papa and Mama didn't believe too much in that," my mother said. All but the youngest two children quit school after eighth grade and made the journey to the big courthouse in Kankakee to take the Constitution test. To attend high school, Grandpa would have to drive them over the mud road each day, and "besides they'd hear about little things at the high school and didn't want their kids into any of that." The original home schooling.

So after completing eighth grade, my mother went to work keeping house for a Jewish family in Kankakee, earning five dollars a week. With the first money she earned, she had a telephone installed at home so she could talk from Kankakee with her mother. She also bought her mother other gifts, among them the family's first Christmas tree and a magazine rack she now has inherited. She worked for this family until age 21, when she married my father and they moved to Martinton with *Memere* Cyrier and Grandma Langellier for the first two babies. Pregnant with my sister Joan, they moved to what I know as my homeplace, the farm on which we were tenants for the next eight babies and over twenty years. About her large family, my mother says simply, "you know, I loved babies and it never bothered me to have another. We always made room." When others began "limiting their families," as she puts it, "I just didn't do that. I tried it and I always felt guilty. It didn't take with me!"

A couple of years before Dad died, one blustery Christmas vacation, she invited my brother Kevin and me to the cemetery where our brother Craig is buried to see the gravestone she had gotten for him and for her and Dad. It wasn't an outing I'd been particularly looking forward to, but I consented, discerning the importance to her of having things prepared and settled. Their marker is commonplace enough, a

low, rectangular gray granite with LANGEILLIER carved in the center, Dad's and her names and birth dates below. "It's very nice," I murmured, somewhat miserably. Then she beckoned me behind the gravestone marker and pointed. "What?" I wondered. Inscribed on the back were all our first names, the ten children, five in a column, in order: Lawrence, Dennis, Joan, Craig, Kristin, Celeste, Kevin, Keith, Darryl, Colette. "You don't have to be buried here," she hastened to tell me, "but I just wanted them there." -a pause-one dollar for each letter-sixty dollars. Not bad."

In her late forties, when my father's eyesight was failing (from macular degeneration) and I was in high school, my mother was in high school, too. She, Dorene, and another woman from the community drove three nights a week to Watseka, and then they took the two days of tests to earn the GED. My mother was "so darn nervous" she went blank and didn't pass the first time.

When it became clear that my father had to quit farming, she initiated another plan - to become a licensed practical nurse. Although my father was supportive, he "didn't believe I'd really do that." After all, my mother didn't get a driver's license until her forties, and she had never driven the 25 miles to Kankakee alone. Let alone the rigorous program at her age and three children still at home. But she enrolled and began a very demanding year of commuting, studying, and training at several different regional hospitals. "It was a rough year," she understates; and it's from this experience that she always praises my academic degrees and professional achievements. And then, as gracefully as they'd managed the traditional expectations for husband and wife, my mother and father changed roles. My father got the three kids meals and ready for school each day, and at age 52 my mother went to work nights at the hospital, 11:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m., so that she'd be home when the kids got home from school and not miss any evening school programs. My dad always joked about the two dollars cash she'd ask him for each night before starting off, a cheap date.

(Continued on Page 6)



## Tickling the Past (continued from page 5)

It was after her night shift several years ago that my husband and I met Mom in Kankakee, and then we all went to Grandma Provost's for breakfast. We had a nourishing farm breakfast, including a helping of Grandma's daily stewed prunes, and then we set off for home and some sleep for my mother. En route we ran into a blinding blizzard, wind blasting snow across flat, black winter fields. In the white out, we drove the car gently into the ditch of a slight valley and stuck firmly. Abandoning the car, we linked arms to stay together against the fierce wind and driving snow and slowly made our way to the nearest farmhouse where we called for a tow truck. Remarkably, it came, but the lack of visibility made a rescue of the car too dangerous, and so we returned to Kankakee in the tow truck.

Not too long after seeing us off, Grandma Provost found us again on her doorstep, again hungry and this time soaked to the skin and shivering. We dressed in her and Grandpa's clothes until ours dried. She cleaned a chicken for our midday meal, unperturbed by the prospect of feeding three more people. She cleaned the store-bought chicken so thoroughly. "You have to clean it so well because they don't." And then I remembered watching my mother clean the chickens she'd just slaughtered in the yard: the colorful entrails, the corn-encrusted crop, the bluish gizzard splayed out on newspapers on the worn drop-leaf table, the smell of burning pin feathers over the gas burner, carcass held aloft by the range chicken feet, in our old kitchen. As Grandma Provost scraped the clinging entrails out of the cavity, she chatted about her honeymoon train ride and her granddaughter, my cousin Kathy, who was dissecting brains as part of her medical studies. We had mashed potatoes with the chicken, made with both butter and cream, and generous salt and pepper - were they ever good. And that ended up being the last time I saw my Grandma before she died.

Today my mother receives a small pension from her years of working at the hospital to supplement social security (recently reduced after my Dad's death). She remains active in every way. *Elle travaillait forte c monde l'.* A hard-working woman. This spring she was honored at the cathedral in Joliet as Woman of the Year in her parish (for a second time), most notably for doing the church linens and volunteering at the local nursing homes, but no doubt for a lifetime of service, community, and faith.

Recently she had a bonfire and sleep-over for a number of her eighteen grandchildren. She played water volleyball for the first time this summer, and she's taking a train by herself to Memphis this month to visit my brother and his family. She reads and keeps everything on Franco-American women I send her. And we talk about it. As I listen to her voice, I hear the echoes of Franco-American women's lives, distant but distinct, and I'm straining to catch the sound of my own voice, too.

## Giguere (continued from page 1)

the women of USM in the adoption of affirmative action guidelines in the UMaine System in the 1970s. Because of this work, then Gov. Kenneth Curtis, appointed her to the Governor's Advisory Council on Women. In addition, she was also appointed to the Maine State Advisory Committee, to the U.S. Commission for Civil Rights which she also chaired for a time. She has served on the Board of Trustees of the Lewiston Public Library, the Lewiston Historical Commission, and the Board of St. Mary's Regional Medical Center.

Following her retirement, she founded, directed and was curator of the Franco-American Heritage Collection at the Lewiston/Auburn College re-organizing the Centre's Heritage Franco-Americain collection. Currently she serves on the state commission to Study the Development of Maine's Franco-American Resources. I now present to you, Madeleine Giguere, known in Franco-American circles as *la marraine*, the godmother, caretaker and guide to the work of Franco-Americans.

*She Knows It...*

## ...In Her Bones

By Rhea Cote Robbins  
Executive Director

On Friday, October 10th at 7:00 p.m., I was invited to do a reading at the Lewiston Public Library After Hours from Wednesday's Child (Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance), a book of creative nonfiction I wrote over the course of five years. Now, in its sixth year of existence, I entered some chapters culled from the larger book into the yearly competition which the Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance holds in order to promote a Maine writer. The categories, in alternating years, have been poetry and fiction; this year was the first year that creative nonfiction became a category. Wednesday's Child is a memoir of being female, Franco-American and growing up in a Maine town.

At the reading, many women in attendance expressed an interest in the Franco-American Women's Institute. I took down names and addresses. This is heartening to have happen. I am excited about the possibility of the start of a women's membership organization which will focus exclusively on the Franco-American women and their lives. In explaining FAWI to the women and the breadth of our focus, it is like holding a mirror up to the community and the reflection we get is of that particular community. Each Franco-American enclave has a personality of its own. It is important that if there are to be regional branches of FAWI that they reflect each community of women. And even within those communities, there may be similar experiences, but many variations on that experience.

The reading for me was like a coming home, *chez-nous*. The audience was in tune to the story telling and again, as has happened repeatedly after each reading, many came up to tell me stories of their own. I was graciously received by the library staff and introduced by Denis Ledoux. For a Franco-American community, such as Lewiston, awakening to their rich cultural heritage, is like a reunion of friends after a long separation. It is another heartening sight. I am happy to say that the Franco-American Women's Institute will have an opportunity to be a part of that awakening. And repeated throughout the state of Maine.

## FAWI MEMBERSHIP

If you would like to be a part of the Franco-American Women's Institute or you know someone who would, send along your information and we will include you in the Institute. Or, if you would like to know more about joining the Franco-American Women's Institute, contact us at the address/email listed on the form below.

### MEMBERSHIP FORM

<input type="checkbox"/> Membership Renewal	Membership Fees\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> New Member	Contribution _____
	Total _____

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DAY # \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_ EVENING # \_\_\_\_\_

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Tell us about yourself: \_\_\_\_\_

Membership fees: Group, \$40/yr; Individual, \$10/yr. Students/Seniors, \$5/yr. Merci!

Please make checks payable to: FAWI and mail to:

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email: FAWI2000@aol.com

NOTE: To subscribe to a new listserv, called FAFEMM-L, open to all, for the exclusive discussion of Franco-American women's issues and studies, send as the body of a message addressed to : listserv@MAINE.MAINE.EDU - subscribe FAFEMM-L your name



# Calendar of Events

## JANUARY

- 8 FAWI Meeting 5:30-7:00 p.m.  
Border's Bookstore - Bangor
- 22 FAWI Meeting 5:30-7:00 p.m.  
Border's Bookstore - Bangor

## FEBRUARY

- 12 FAWI Meeting 5:30-7:00 p.m.  
Border's Bookstore - Bangor
- 26 FAWI Meeting 5:30-7:00 p.m.  
Border's Bookstore - Bangor

## ANNOUNCEMENT

The group "Quebecois du Sud" meets for social evenings. If you are interested in speaking or practicing your French, you are welcome. For times of upcoming meetings or other information, contact Lucille Gosselin 825-3166.

## DECEMBER

- 14 Soiree de Franco - American Women  
Franco American Women's Institute -  
Location to be announced

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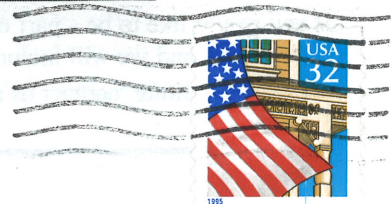
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