

## Going back in time – a young American at uB in the 60s: interview

*Summer 1967. A 14-year old Jim Pell arrives in Dijon with a group from Indiana State University to learn French. There are a few student residence halls, very few trees and 3-4 buildings on the Dijon campus. Now approaching retirement in 2014, he recounts his memories in France.*



“My mother was a French teacher – she was one of the professors who took their students from Indiana State University to Dijon for a few weeks of summer so they could improve their French and she took me with her. I barely spoke French and I enrolled in an international beginner’s class for the holidays. I had never done anything like that before. It was the best learning experience of my life.”

The Indiana State University students regularly came to Dijon each summer over several years to take part in French classes offered by the International Centre for French Studies ([CIEF](#)), previously known as the Committee for the patronage of international students at the University of Dijon.

Jim started to study French one year before arriving in Dijon. He had average grades, but after his stay at a summer school in Dijon he received only excellent grades.

“The people in my class in Dijon came from different countries: Iceland, Germany, Japan, Norway, Gambia... The only language we had in common was French and we were forced to communicate in French even though we were not fluent. ”

“The only person from France was the teacher. At the start it was very difficult but in six weeks there I learnt more than I had done during several years at high school and at college here at Indiana State University. It was a highly enriching experience: I wanted to learn French because I had to use it everywhere every day. It is so much easier to learn when you are motivated!”



*Jim's student card*

Jim always remembers his textbook:

*En France comme si vous y étiez. Voix et images*  
(In France as if you were there. Voice and images).

“During classes we often watched films and I especially remember a film where the characters were talking about Napoleon. Remember that this was the age before video tapes and computers. We also went into the laboratory where we used headphones which allowed us to listen to sentences and then repeat them. Once when it was my turn to repeat a sentence, the teacher interrupted me and said ‘No, that isn’t good, you speak with a Parisian accent.’ For her I had not pronounced my sentence correctly, but I was flattered as I thought I had learnt how to imitate the Parisian accent during my weekend spent in Paris just before!”

## Why learn French?

“For a variety of reasons. To go to the University of Indiana you had to speak foreign languages. The only alternatives back then were Latin and Spanish. Very few schools offered French or German. Let’s just say that nobody was interested by Latin while the majority of people learned Spanish as Mexico was considered an important country and illegal immigration had not posed any problems yet. The image of France was chic and sophisticated back then: French fashion, food, we loved everything in the US. French was an exotic language.”

But Jim’s motivation to learn French goes even further.

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*“My mother and my aunt both spoke French. My grandmother on my mother’s side was the first child in her family to be born in the US. My great grandparents, aunts and uncles were Belgian immigrants who came to Indiana in the 1800s to work in the coalmines. Their surname was L’été but when they arrived on Ellis Island the immigration officer wrote down Lete and their surname changed. These family links gave me an even greater desire to learn French.”*

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## Your level of French today?

“After my stay in Dijon I continued to learn French at high school and at college, but once I graduated from Indiana there were not a lot of opportunities to use French. Today I wonder what my level of French is – that of a 4-year old? I can still be understood in French, but with the little vocabulary I have left I have trouble understanding responses. I only understand if the person speaks very slowly, using very simple words. In Dijon I learnt lots of useful phrases like ‘I would like a good white wine’ or ‘I would like a nice room with two beds which is very comfortable but not too expensive’.”

The interview with Jim takes place in English over email. He explained to us that it was always easier for him to speak than write in French. “When you speak French you do not think about spelling and punctuation. In fact, what was most difficult for me in French was writing and pronouncing the letter R. Unfortunately I have forgotten a lot of things since then. Do I regret it? Yes. But when you are 61 you start to regret a lot of things which you forgot to do.”

## Using French in professional and private life

After having received a Bachelor's degree in telecommunication from Indiana State University, Jim found his first job in sales in Tennessee. In 1980 he was hired by an insurance company where he still works to this day. "I intend to retire in March 2015. Personally I have not noticed the financial crisis in these last few years."

In his professional life he has not had the chance to use French, but he tells us an anecdote from his time as a student which confirms the clichés which foreigners have about French people.

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"It is a story which I am not especially proud of and which is a bit embarrassing. You should know that the majority of things which you see on TV about the US happen in big cities, but the majority of the US is vast and rural with very few foreign visitors. I was 18 years old and I was visiting a friend who had just been accepted at a small university in the middle of nowhere in Iowa. After a party, we went to a concert where I met a girl. Without thinking about it, I told her that I was a French exchange student. I had not planned this, it was just a mad idea from a young student having drunk a bit of wine.

I spoke to her in English, imitating a French accent, and I gave her three kisses on the cheek like I had seen the French do when they met their friends. She was so surprised and impressed to have met a 'real' French student that she insisted on introducing me to all her friends and she wanted me to give them kisses like I had done to her. As I did not have much choice I did it. And then all these friends wanted to introduce me to their friends and I do not remember how many kisses I must have given out that evening! I was the star of the evening up until the moment where someone said 'Go and find Susan, she speaks French!' I said to myself 'Damn, I'm going to be found out' but when Susan arrived I started saying French phrases which I had learnt by heart before and I spoke very quickly to impress her and fortunately it worked when she told me embarrassed 'You speak too quickly for me to understand you!' The day after I was ashamed of my behavior and luckily her level of French was worse than mine!

A few weeks later when my housemate gave me a letter from our mailbox she told me 'Jacques Pell???' At first I did not know what she was talking about but then I realized that I must have told one of the girls that I was called Jacques. And one of them must have asked for my address. The letter was really lovely, she talked about her family, their farm and she invited me to come and see them and teach them some things about life in France. I never replied because I was too ashamed. I think that to this day she must have thought she met a French student while she was at college."

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Today Jim is married and the father of two children.

## Your impressions of...

- **Dijon?** “The only thing which I remember is having eaten at a restaurant where the specialty was coq au vin. But back then I thought the dish was called *coco vin*. Even to this day coq au vin remains one of my favorite dishes.”
- **...the people?** “As I had a low level of French the only French person who I spoke to was my teacher.”
- **...the culture?** “I saw lots of churches, museums and castles. I remember a reception in a wine cellar. We were all stood up in a circle singing a song which the French had taught us with our hands in the air.” The famous *ban bourguignon*.
- **...the food?** “I really liked the French cuisine, but I had some stomach problems.”
- **...the Dijon campus?** “There were not a lot of trees on campus, it was like a plain. I lived in the Vauban building, in room 430 where there was a bed and a desk. I had a transistor radio with me and sometimes I listened to French radio. My favorite song was *Mais quand le matin* by Claude Francois. Sometimes my mother’s students took me with them and I especially remember one afternoon where I had a drink with them in a bar on campus. We went by apricot trees with ripe fruit. We did not grow apricots in Indiana and this impressed me as I had never seen fresh apricots, just apricots in tins or dried. Later on, I went to the toilets in the bar but there were no urinals and I heard girls’ voices... I panicked as I found myself in the women’s toilets, but afterwards I realized they were mixed. Mixed toilets did not exist in the US!”
- **...the girls?** “I remember a really beautiful German girl who was in my class. Her hair was shorter than Twiggy’s, one of the famous models of the 60s. I did not speak a lot to the girls as they were all older than me, but one time I went to a dance night!”

## Trips during your stay

“Each weekend we went on trips in the region, in France or in neighboring countries. We visited Geneva, Luxembourg, Monaco and Venice. When classes finished, we rented a car to visit Munich and Bonn, Beethoven’s city of birth. In France we visited Paris and Antibes where I even celebrated my 15<sup>th</sup> birthday.”

## Friendships made in France

“I became friends with a boy from Keflavik in Iceland because he spoke English, but I lost his address and I was not able to stay in touch with him. Back then the internet did not exist and phone calls to foreign countries were expensive. After our interview, I tried to find some of the people from my mother’s group of students on Facebook. There was George who replied the next day saying that he remembered me and the time he accompanied me to meet my pen pal in Paris. A few months before arriving in Dijon my high school teacher offered us the chance to do an exchange with French high school students. I wrote a letter to my pen pal – Michelle R., a girl who lived in Paris, but I never received a response. When we were in Paris I decided to go to hers to meet her. She lived in the 19<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement* and George offered to

accompany me as I was young, I did not speak good French and the 19<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement* was not one of the safest neighborhoods of Paris. When we found Michelle's building, someone, who I assume was her mother, told us that Michelle was on holiday in the south of France. I do not know if this was true or if it was because she was suspicious and afraid of these two unknown Americans."

## Cultural differences

"Being a young provincial boy coming from a very religious environment it was incredible for me to see how laid back and relaxed people in France were. In Paris I saw people kissing in public parks which was surprising! When I visited the Moulin rouge (and with my mother!) and when I drank champagne on evenings out, I thought I was in another world!"

## A message for students who want to or hesitate to go abroad?

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*"They should absolutely do it. It will change their lives. For the better. My stay had such an effect on me that even 47 years later I think it was the best learning experience that I ever had in my life. And I hope one day to return to visit France and your beautiful Dijon campus!"*

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*Jim, far left, with his mother and two other members of the group from Indiana State University during their stay in Dijon.*



*The Droit-Lettres building in 1967, where classes took place.*





Fête folklorique - Le groupe mexicain

Cliché Manier, Dijon



Le cours de cuisine

Photo Jacques Bernard

The activities offered for students by the CIEF at the time – traditional party, seen in a brochure.

The activities offered for students by the CIEF at the time – cookery classes, seen in a brochure.

	Noms	Adresse	Date et lieu de naissance	Adresse à Dijon	Notes des cours
808	NILSON	Américain	5 mai 1947 Tare Haute Indiana	3010 So. 11th St. Tare Haute Indiana	R.M.
810	PELL	Américain	25 décembre 1913 Bragg Indiana	7818 G. National ave Bragg Indiana	R.M.
811	PELL	Américain	18 juillet 1958 Bragg Indiana	1818 G. National ave Bragg Indiana	R.M.
812	PESAVANTO	Américain	25 février Clinton Indiana	807 Louisiana Rue Clinton Indiana	R.M.
813	ROBERTS	Américain	20 février 1949 Tare Haute Indiana	227 N. 5th St. Tare Haute Indiana	R.M.
814	SMITH	Américain	20 décembre 1945 Animal Wells Texas	R.R. 4 Crawfordsville Indiana	R.M.
815	WIKSA	Américain	28 novembre 1944 Hammond Indiana	2405 French Avenue Whiting Indiana	R.M.
816	WILE	Américain	20 mai 1943	201 N. 11th St.	R.M.



An extract from the registration book for international classes in the summer holidays of 1967, damaged by flooding at the Maison de l'Université.

The mandolin which Jim bought in Dijon in 1967 and which he still keeps.

→ You, too, can learn French at the

[International Centre for French Studies](#) in Dijon.