

A Trip Back in Time

by

Donald Fraser

Donald Fraser is the great grandson of Erasmus Gourdine (c1832-1893). There is mounting evidence to support the belief that Erasmus is possibly the brother of William Mackey Gourdine (c1833-1929)

On a recent trip to France, my wife and I decided to locate and visit Caucourt, the home of my French ancestors – the Gourdins (or Gourdain as the name was spelled when the first member migrated to the British colony of South Carolina in the late 1600s). Caucourt is located in the Department of Artois, which is in the region of France called North Pas de Calais. The region extends from northeast of Paris along the Belgium border to the English Channel.

We have a friend who lives in the southernmost part (Bapaume) of Pas de Calais so we wrote to her for information about the region, the location of Caucourt, and where to get information about the area. She not only provided information about the area, but also agreed to be our guide. So, on 6 June 2004, over 300 years after the first Gourdain left France, we drove north to find the ancestral village.

It was a wonderful sunny day (about 75 degrees Fahrenheit). It is a beautiful area with rolling hill sides covered in farmland. During the two-hour drive we passed through many villages whose names almost all ended in “court.” The area is very sparsely settled and most of the villages seemed to have only 20 to 60 homes. During the trip I tried to picture how it must have looked 300 years ago.

Having lived for four years in France (just north of Bordeaux) while in the Army in the 1960s (and visiting there often in later years) I expected to see towns and villages full of old houses and buildings and even Roman ruins. The village I lived in then was full of old houses and buildings and a chateau built in the 12th Century that was still standing. In the village that my wife comes from (near Poitiers) there is a church that is several hundred years old (still being used) and the home of her parents is almost two hundred years old (and still lived in).

However, as the road curved and I saw the sign “Caucourt” I was immediately disappointed. The village was very neat and clean and the buildings were all new. The only old building in view was the church on the side of the road. We drove through the village, which consisted of only about 35 to 40 homes, and saw only a few men working on a new house. We went down every street and saw no commercial or government buildings (no gas station, restaurant, café, post office, police station, etc), only modern homes and farm buildings. There are no ruins (Roman or otherwise) in Caucourt today.

We drove back to the church that we had passed on entering Caucourt and the door was locked with a sign posted that listed the days and times that confessions would be heard and mass celebrated during the month. Next to the church parking lot was a trailer painted green with a sign “Mairie” (city hall). The door to it was also locked but

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fortunately we encountered the secretary to the mayor a few doors over standing in front of his house.

This fortunate (and lucky) meeting was the highlight of the trip. The secretary, Monsieur Auguste Moreau (2 rue du Marias, 62150 Caucourt, France, tel 03 21 55 26 68), was very friendly and knowledgeable about the village and region. We explained to him that I was a descendant of Louis Gourdin who had migrated to the English Colony of America in the 1690s and that I wanted to see Caucourt, learn about the village, research any records that maybe available, and contact any Gourdins who still may live there. He said that the Gourdin (as they spell it today) family was a very well known in the area and, indeed, some still lived in Caucourt.

According to Monsieur Moreau, the village was once a Roman outpost in the ancient region of the Roman Empire called Gaul. In the fourth century the region was invaded by the Visigoths (nomadic warring Germanic people) who settled in the region (renaming the villages with names ending in "court").

He further stated that because of the region's proximity to the English Channel and the short distance from Calais to Dover (about 21-22 miles) and the lack of mountains to the East it was a favorite invasion route and consequently the village had been destroyed many times. The church is the only old building still standing in the village. The most recent destruction occurred during the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, then during World War I with the trench warfare through the region, and finally in May 1940 when German forces fought the French and British Expeditionary Forces throughout the area as the Allied forces retreated to Dunkirk for evacuation to Great Britain.

As to the village archives, Monsieur Moreau stated that in all small villages in France in those days the vital records (births, deaths, weddings, etc) were maintained by the priest in the closest church. At a date not too long ago a decision was made that all records were to be sent to the administrative department level (in this case Arras) but very little was forwarded from Caucourt. Many records had been a lost or destroyed in various wars, therefore very little remains. He said that other people who had come looking for records in the past were referred to Arras and were greatly disappointed or found nothing in their research. There are no historic records to be found in Caucourt.

The conversation finally got around to the Gourdins still living in Caucourt. The descendants of Valentin and Mary (nee Piedevin) Gourdain are Mesdames Mouquet and Marin, the daughters of Charles Gourdin. The married sisters live in separate houses on rue d'en Haut in Caucourt. As it is, the French custom to telephone first before visiting, we did not attempt to call on them. I intend to write letters at a later date.

I had noticed earlier that there was no cemetery next to the church and in fact had not seen one when we drove around in the village. Monsieur Moreau said what was left of the old cemetery (which had been next to the church under what is now a parking lot) after the last three wars had been moved to a new location about one mile from the village. At the new cemetery more disappointment – not one of the tombs or headstones was even 100 years old years old and since the cemetery, like the village, is so small I

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was able to read the inscriptions on each grave. There are several graves for Gourdins but not one is even 50 years old.

As we drove away from the village I was glad I had visited it – at least I saw the church that the Gourdains probably had worshipped in before they became Huguenots and the area in which they had once lived. However, unless you only want to see a small modern French village in the middle of nowhere, don't waste your time in going to Caucourt.

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