

IN FRENCH VILLAGE, A CHATEAU OWNER TAKES ON CITY HALL

By Edward Cody February 7, 1987

ST. JOUIN BRUNEVAl, FRANCE -- As the lord of the manor tells it, the battle was joined for good late one night when someone hacked off the head of his pony and dumped it on the chateau doorstep.

"That day, I vowed I would have his hide," recalled Xavier Maillet, still indignant over the pony's demise. "He is going to lose his post as mayor. I don't say it is the mayor who goes in there himself and chops off a pony's head with an axe, but it is the people around him."

Since the pony incident last July, Maillet and Mayor Joseph Delahais have been open enemies, pitting chateau against city hall in a bitter struggle for the 1,200 souls of this little Normandy village. Actually, the mayor and local notables were feuding before then. In fact, nearly everyone in St. Jouin Bruneval has been feuding, for what seems like a long time.

The rancor has so divided villagers that people have taken to driving over to neighboring hamlets to shop, so they do not have to meet enemies from the next farm. Jean-Marie Casanova, for instance, said business has dropped by a third in his combination cafe and grocery store because only one camp comes around any more.

The quarrels seem remote and inexplicable to an outsider visiting here in the Pays de Caux, a windswept plateau that ends with the chalky cliffs of the English Channel. But the villagers have reached deep into French tradition for the intensity and longevity of their feuds, and Frenchmen seem to know instinctively what the disputes are about and why they persist.

Such durable spats among closed-in villagers have become an entrenched part of the national folklore. They have even entered the language with the expression "belltower wars," after the church towers that inevitably seem to get involved. Gabriel Chevallier immortalized the tradition in 1934 with a classic novel entitled "Clochemerle," about plans to build a urinal near a village church.

St. Jouin Bruneval's belltower wars have struck a national chord. The magazine *L'Evenement du Jeudi* ran an article last week entitled "Clochemerle in the Pays de Caux." A few days later, a national television network visited with cameras.

"La France profonde," officials in Paris smiled knowingly when asked about the troubles in St. Jouin Bruneval. "The French heartland."

Maillet, the lord of the manor, said the heart of the problem is his enemy, Mayor Delahais. Michel Crochemore, a village council member, explained that the latest round of quarreling started because Delahais had his eye on the village chateau, the Clos des Fees, but Maillet showed up out of nowhere and bought it first.

The chateau, in a hodge-podge of architectural styles, has long been a village landmark. It was built at the turn of the century by the son of "La Belle Ernestine," a local woman who was the mistress of a wealthy painter.

After being inhabited by various nobility and would-be nobility, the chateau became an orphanage run by nuns, then a home for handicapped children run by local government authorities. Finally, it lay vacant and run-down until Maillet came along in 1982.

Maillet, 42, was no ordinary lord of the manor. First, he was an hors-saints, which is the way villagers designate an outsider. Then there was the question of his animals. The present list includes a lion in his bedroom closet, some pythons and a brace of big dogs, without counting a rat farm to feed the pythons and a few ponies.

"I have never been let down by my animals," Maillet said, "but with human beings it has happened to me many times."

One disappointment came when Maillet started a restaurant in one wing of the chateau. The way he remembers it, Delahais opposed him every step of the way. By the time he got all the necessary approvals, Maillet complained, he had lost his desire to run a restaurant.

Delahais, whose family has been farming around here for some time, refused to explain his side of the quarrel, saying, "I have nothing to do with reporters from Paris."

Things started to get serious last summer. That was when Maillet staged a canine demonstration at city hall to get back one of his dogs that had been thrown into the pound.

Maillet said the two-month-old puppy was chained inside the chateau grounds and that Delahais and the local game warden let him loose on purpose, then impounded him. However the dog got into the pound, Maillet refused to pay the prescribed fine to get him out.

To win the puppy's release, he brought two Great Danes to city hall and locked them inside with Jean Emo, the city hall secretary. When that did not work, he brought two more dogs, then two more. By the time the afternoon was over, several dozen dogs were amassed inside and outside the building and the impounded puppy was released without a fine.

About two weeks later, Maillet said he came home late one night to find his pony's head on the porch. Emo said that, despite rumors around the village, he had nothing to do with that. Maybe Maillet did it himself, but no one really knows, he added.

Local police said the matter has never been resolved. Neither, they said, have Maillet's complaints about several dogs being killed, or his charges that someone has been shooting at his chateau in the middle of the night.

Insensed, Maillet said he has been shooting back. No one in the village has heard the volleys. But Maillet has also fired back with copies of city hall documents that he said prove irregularities in the village finances. He appeared at a town council meeting last October and made his charges public. Since then, the 15-member town council has refused to vote approval of the village budget.

"There is a bad atmosphere," observed Crochemore.