

Viva la Harley!

French bikers in hog heaven

by Ted Almen

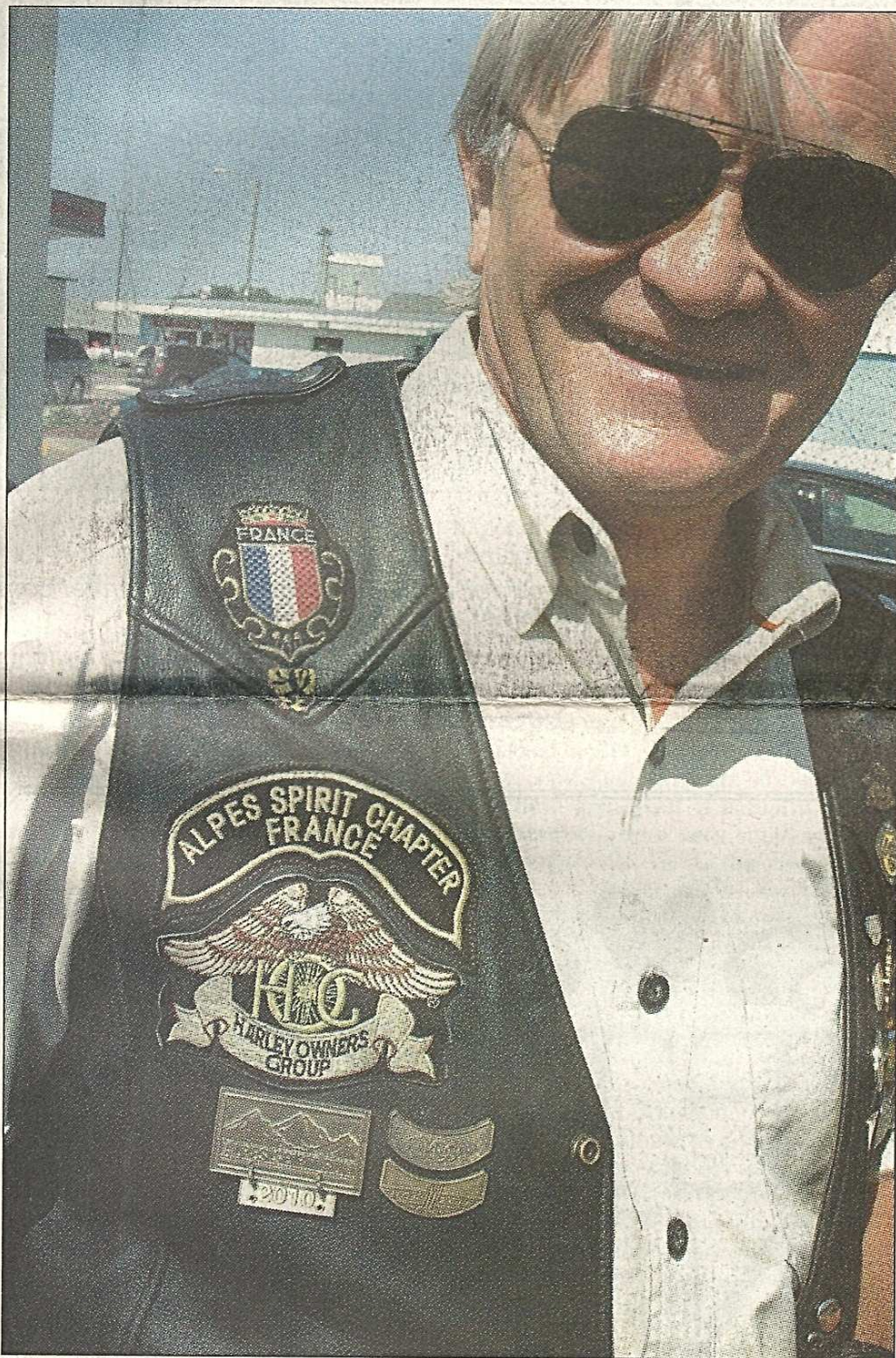
Washing down *le déjeuner* with a Coors might be the perfect lunch break for this pack of 'Easy Riders' rumbling through town last week Wednesday on their rented Harley-Davidsons. As Edouard Durando put it, the two dozen or so members of this French gang of friends rolled westward to experiencing an America dream of visiting the (apparently) world-famous Sturgis, South Dakota, Motorcycle Rally.

Durando struggled a bit to find the right words to describe this adventure -- not because of reluctance, but more due to fluency. On the contrary he was excited to offer a glimpse into what his group was doing, and anyway his English was a lot better than the reporter's French.

In all there were 24 people riding 12 bikes and one support vehicle. They flew into Chicago where all were rented for the three-week American excursion. Sturgis was just one small part of the journey which included Yellowstone, Mount Rushmore, Kerkhoven and other wonderful places to see from the back of a shiny new 'hog,' as they were only too happy to call their rides.

The trip began in earnest on July 20, but as Catherine Donati, a school cook back in her native France, said it actually began two years ago when they first began this great plan. Over the course of three weeks the Alpes Spirit Chapter of HOG (Harley Owners Group) was making a loop that would take them through the most famous of U.S. national parks, as far west as Miles City, Montana, before heading back toward Sturgis via the Grand Tetons, Jackson Hole and Cody, Wyoming.

After spending three days soaking up some the revelry of hundreds of thousands of bellowing Harleys and the enterprise of nearly as many tee-shirt stands, the foreign legion will meander back to O'Hare International Airport for a relaxing flight back to their home base of Annecy, France.



Edouard Durando proudly displayed the Alpes Spirit Chapter colors on his black leather vest. The Frenchman said Harley-Davidson is a very popular bike in his country. "It's a legend," he stated.



Various countries were represented with flags on the back of the Alpes Spirit Chapter motorcycles that roared through Kerkhoven.



The Alpes Spirit Chapter includes people from all walks of life, said member Edouard Durando. They see this tour as an American dream, seeing the sights of a large piece of the U.S. including, of course the famous Motorcycle Rally in Sturgis, South Dakota.

Why Harley? was an obvious question. Seems the American-made motorcycle is creating something of a French Revolution of its own in Durando's country. "It's a good bike," he answered. "A legend, a symbol of America. There are many people who ride Harleys in France." This group likes Harley-Davidson so much, in fact, that they made the factory in Milwaukee one of their scheduled stops.

The two dozen Alpes Spirit Chapter members all knew each other before coming across the pond. Just like their American counterparts now encamped in the rugged hills that claim Gutzon Borglum's massive sculpture of four great U.S. presidents, these folks all come from different 'rides' of life. Durando himself sells machine

tools, Donati is a cook, others are engaged in the medical field, are builders and farmers and masons and factory workers. One of the women clad head to toe in black leathers is more typically seen wearing Prada in her position as Deputy General Manager of the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Geneva -- the largest and certainly among the most exclusive accommodations in Switzerland.

"France is a little-melting pot," said Durando as he described the make-up of his group. That is opposed to the United States which is also known as a "melting pot" of cultures and ancestries, but which is expansive in size.

And it's that very thing that these Frenchmen and women were anxious to discover -- that little bit of

the American dream. Niveilk Garcia (her father-in-law was Spanish, part of the "little melting pot") described in amazement how they had ridden through countryside and into a very small village... "and then it's like Hollywood, King Kong!" she exclaimed. Alpes Spirit Chapter had just stumbled onto the Wisconsin Dells.

Their whistles wetted and muscles stretched, the funny-talking versions of Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper hoisted legs over their hogs once again and brought them roaring to life. As they turned back onto U.S. Highway 12 heading west there were many waves of *au revoir* to their new acquaintances, and over the bawl of the big bikes was heard a lusty shout of "Viva America!"



With an "au revoir" and a wave, the Alpes Spirit Chapter motorcyclists roared out of Kerkhoven after a refreshing stop to stretch muscles and quench thirsts.