



LETTER FROM FRANCE / COURRIER DE FRANCE

July 2014

Labrit – shepherd *par excellence*

Hello Everyone / *Bonjour à tous !*

One of the most magic of sounds for me is the dinging of bells worn by animals in the mountains. The sounds can range from the ting-ting of the small bells worn by lambs, to the great tonking of very large bells around the necks of cattle and horses. During the winters we hear the bells from our house because the animals are in their home pastures in the foothills (*piedmonts*) where we live. But at this time of year most of the animals are in the *estives* or summer pastures, so we have to go for a serious hike to be with them. It seems timely to devote this letter to the *transhumance* or seasonal movement of animals between the mountains and the valleys.



The *transhumance* occurs twice a year, in the late spring when the risk of new snowfalls in the mountains is low, and in the autumn when the temperatures plummet and the snow reappears. It is quite a logistical effort to accomplish these migrations, and they have been done for centuries. To our delight, the traditions are still very strong in our *Pyrénées* mountains. For our neighbours, the *transhumance* takes about 12 hours of hard walking through villages, over bridges, along wooded trails, up steep paths and finally through the upland pastures. The spring trek usually start very early in the morning to avoid any traffic on the roads during the early stages. During this journey the sheep,

cattle, donkeys, goats and horses must of course be kept carefully under control. This is the responsibility of the shepherds and their families and friends (often a whole village will turn out to help). Indispensable members of the team are the dogs, and there are two types: the *labrits* who do the actual shepherding, and the *patous* who are the guardians of the flocks and herds. The *labrits* are now often replaced by our own Scottish border collies which are very popular here too, and usually better tempered than the quick and snappy *labrits*. The *patous* are amazing great creatures (see photo at the end of the letter). They apparently will tackle wolves and bears, and are trained to be very suspicious of people who do not belong to their 'pack'. But if you are a member of the family they abound with love and loyalty.



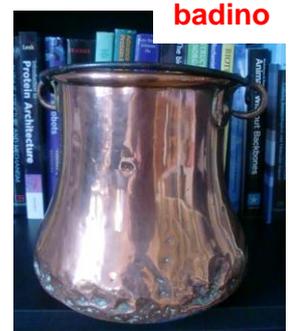
Some villages have in recent years encouraged a re-discovery of some of the traditions, and indeed there are full-fledged festivals which attract an enthusiastic following. Our neighbouring village of *Campan* provides a good example of how the traditions may be adapted to present times. They offer a well-publicised programme to accompany the 3000 ewes and lambs (*brebis* and *agneaux*): 3 am depart Campan; 7 am *rendez-vous* at

Artiques, a small village on the road to the ski area at the *Col du Tourmalet*; noon arrival at *Tourmalet* for the blessing of the flock; 12.30-2 pm *repas champêtre* (cooked meal enjoyed at long trestle tables in tents); afternoon programme of events such as shearing, dog handling, folklore groups; 7 pm evening meal with entertainment. Amazing. In our valley (*notre vallée*), the sheep are raised primarily for meat, but in the *vallées* on either side there are many flocks which are kept for milk and cheese production. You can now get the delicious *Pyrenean brebis* cheese (our favourite of all the many French cheeses) in supermarkets in Scotland.



In our village of *Gerde*, and in many other neighbouring communities the emphasis is on raising cattle for meat. Nowadays the cows and their calves are taken to the *estives*, and left to their own devices most of the time, with daily or twice daily visits by the farmers in 4x4's or quad bikes to be sure that all is well. The cattle *estives* are normally at lower altitudes than those for sheep.

In former times, perhaps a hundred years ago, the main farm animals were dairy cattle. In particular, our *vallée* was known far and wide for its excellent butter with its special taste and quality. You can imagine that the management of the dairy animals in the *estives* called for a quite different way of life. The herds were accompanied by herdsmen (*vachers*), or indeed herdswomen (*vachères*) who lived in the *estives* all summer with their animals. They often lived in small hamlets known as *courtaous*, which consisted of several *cabanes*, usually with an attached lean-to for the milking, and perhaps a small stable for the calves. The milking was done morning and evening, as usual. And the milk was retrieved daily by another member of the family who stayed at the home farm in the *vallée*, probably with a donkey or mule to do the serious carrying. During the day the milk was stored in small copper containers (*badinos*) which were placed in



stone niches (*leytés*) cooled by mountain burns. By chance, we acquired a *badino* from the owner of our house when he sold the house to us, together with a treasure-trove of other traditional items. It was only while I was writing this letter that I learned what this copper pot (photo taken in my office) was used for. It means much more to me now.

Sadly the *courtaous* are mostly in ruins now, though some have been restored as second homes. But it is not all bad news, and the valleys with high *estives* for sheep where the milk is made into cheese are enjoying a significant *renaissance*. There are now about 60 families in the western *Pyrenées* who spend summers with their flocks compared to only two families about 25 years ago. Two young men with mules make regular trips to these families, taking provisions up over often very rough and difficult terrain, and returning with the large round cheeses. It is stunningly beautiful country, and must be a uniquely wonderful experience to live there during the summer.



Pic du Midi d'Ossau



Patou with a member of his 'pack'

Greetings to all / *Amitiés à tous!*

Linda

Together with Douglas, Maddy and Magnus...