

Interview — Mary Ann and Hal Glicksman

Meet this enthusiastic and warm hearted American couple who settled in a small village just one hour from Paris. They are both active in the worlds of art and non-profit organisations. Find out how they very graciously became an integral part of the village by throwing a thank you party for all the people who helped them remodel and settled in their house and their new life.

Celine Anthonioz: Where are you both originally from?

Mary Ann: Hal was born and reared in Los Angeles and I grew up in Tacoma Washington.

C.A.: Where did you live before coming to France?

Mary Ann: We lived in Santa Monica since 1980 where we reared our two sons in a little blue house with a big yard for animals. Our older son, John, has cerebral palsy and we spent 20 years slowly renovating the house to be completely accessible for him and his wheel chair. Our plan, since he was very young, was to ensure that he would have a home to live in as an adult and not face the difficult choices of finding an accessible, affordable house or living in a group home. So we had always planned for us to move out, not him. The idea of France came much later and is a great one for all of us. John is truly given the opportunity to live an independent life with me being too far away to meddle in daily household things. He has wonderful roommates and a support team. Both our sons love coming to France to visit. In the intervals the internet and telephone keep us connected.

C.A.: What brought you to Ymeray, this remote village located in the Eure-et-Loir area?

Mary Ann: I have had a love of France since childhood and have always harbored a longing to live there. I was an art student at the *École des Beaux Arts* in Paris in 1968 and have vivid memories of my friends and the events of May 1968. After 25 years of marriage I showed Hal a photo of a *cour de ferme* for sale near Chartres that I had found from a real estate agent. Hal was intrigued and our search began.

Hal: We wanted a house in the country less than one hour from Paris because of friends and museums and galleries. Chartres was our starting point for searching. We fell in love with the aqueduct of Maintenon and the Eure valley. We found a cute place in the summer of 2002 but it sold before we could place a bid on it. We decided to search systematically and make appointments via the internet with realtors before we arrived. For several months we spent hours looking at the little pictures and descriptions emailed to us by real estate agents. The next chance for us to come to France was in January 2003. Via the internet, we made appointments and met with 2 realtors per day and saw 3 or 4 houses with each. It was snowing and the properties all looked bleak and bare. After almost 2 weeks of searching we had found nothing. Finally a realtor from Maintenon showed us a farm in Ymeray. As we drove around the curve we saw the side of a stone barn; we both silently wished this to be the one. She

stopped in front of the big red gates and it was perfect: dirty grey and cold – but we saw the “possibilities”.

C.A.: When you first moved to this village, how did the locals welcome you?

Mary Ann: The day we signed the contract to buy the property, the U.S. dropped their first bombs on Baghdad. We were concerned about being accepted as Americans, but everyone we have met here has been warm and welcoming. No matter their political beliefs, they tell us they love Americans even though they abhor our present government.

People from the Beauce are reserved, but they are also curious and gracious. Each person we met asked, “Why would someone move from Santa Monica to this little farm village?” When we say that we love the village, the French culture, the French language and the French people, they always want to continue the conversation. Every year the town has a party at the New Year to welcome newcomers to the village. It was very sweet, about 15 couples and quite a few children. We were the only foreigners. Hal found the *fève* in his *galette des rois* and received the gold crown.

Hal: *Le quatorze Juillet* provided the next opportunity to meet a lot of people at the lunch and bal in the garden of the *mairie*. The opening question was always “Why Ymeray?” Then over the 5-course lunch there is a lot of time to talk.

We have continued to meet people through our interests. People from the village wonder about the art installed on the farm. There are two artist couples who live in our town, both very friendly. One has lived here for 40 years and does stained glass windows and liturgical art, the other is a young artist with a gallery in Paris. Mary Ann loves horses and have met everyone around who has one. We visit and are invited to go on carriage rides through the countryside. Building a garden from scratch gives us a great opportunity to ask for advice from families who have been gardeners and farmers for generations. Avid gardeners like to exchange plants and visit each other. A third of our garden is from plants from neighbors. This fall we are in the position to divide plants and to share with them. Our biggest successes are the artichokes and lavender.

C.A.: Did you run into any obstacles when you moved to France? Which ones?

Hal: A bit of a paper chase to get residency permits, not too bad. A chance to learn about French bureaucracy. Maybe contrary to popular belief, we have always found everyone in a government office to be friendly and helpful.

C.A.: How is your overall experience of living in France?

Mary Ann: After living in Ymeray for almost two years, I still wake up every morning as if in a dream. A beautiful little 12th Century church surrounded by trees and roses fills the bedroom window and a new adventure awaits, if only to see how much the lettuce has grown overnight.

Hal: We like to build and fix the house and work on the garden for exercise and recreation. These activities occupy our time and make it economically possible to have a much nicer home than we could afford if we had to pay for everything to be done. We live on a fixed income in dollars, so a little frosting has disappeared from the cake with the drop of dollar.

We take day trips instead of overnights and pack lunches instead of consulting the Michelin restaurant guide. French forests are wonderful romantic places for a lunch and provide wildflower bouquets for the table.

Mary Ann: The challenge for me is studying for the French *permis de conduire*. We are driving with our California licenses but need to change over. I have been working on the code de la route on-line for months and still am not ready for the exam. The test is in the form of video game with a handset to press the right letters from multiple choice questions based on a picture or video of a driving situation. I think I need to be a teenager again to be comfortable with it.

C.A.: You've both worked in the art world and you are still very active in that area - What is it that you used to do and what do you do today?

Hal: I was director of the Art Gallery at UC Irvine when I met Mary Ann. She was the actor in a performance piece by Guy de Cointet, that I showed. Guy died in 1983 in Los Angeles. We have been close to his family in France ever since that time. Recently Guy's work has been recognized by the Tate and the Pompidou and other museums. Mary Ann was invited to perform a piece of Guy's work in the contemporary art museum in Sète on the Mediterranean coast of France, and will perform another piece in Los Angeles in December 2007. She is doing a dress rehearsal in our renovated stable for friends from the village and from Paris.

The farm has lots of room to hang art and places for guest artists to work. George Herms is a well-loved LA artist who does beat generation assemblages. He stayed with us for several weeks and made art out of rusty farm junk and beautifully weathered doors and parts of wagons. Some of these pieces were recently shown at the *Galerie Vallois Sculpture* in Paris and at the *Grand Palais*. In the barn there is a piece of California light and space art by Eric Orr. I showed this piece in 1972 and it has since been acquired by the Guggenheim Museum. They were kind enough to lend it too us to exhibit until 2011. Another California artist, Michael Mcmillen made an installation from a secret passage behind the barn ending with a large brass eye on the street side of the wall, entitled *L'observatoire d'Ymeray*. One can peer into the pupil of the eye and see the interior passage.

Many of the artists I showed in the 1970s are now well known and have galleries in Paris. Through them we have met and made friends in Paris and have found galleries we really like. You can get an idea of the artists and projects at our website*.

C.A.: Mary Ann, you used to be a director of a non-profit organization in L.A.? Can you explain what the organization was about and what is your involvement today?

Mary Ann: The Computer Access Center (www.cac.org) was founded by a group of parents in 1986 to provide Assistive Technology information and services for anyone who had a disability. All of our children had disabilities and computer technology presented new solutions for so many of the issues they faced. At that time few people had any knowledge of technology's potential for people with disabilities for learning, communicating, writing, environmental controls... Our little organization that provided information and support for parents grew over the years into a center that provides many services. The core service is consultation and assessment to help children and adults with all kinds of disabilities find and use technology that could compensate for problems or deficiencies of abilities they have. We also provide training sessions and classes for families, schools, hospitals, community groups,

employment training, art classes for children and projects for seniors.

Leaving the Computer Access Center was like leaving a grown-up child. With a good board of directors and a new executive director it will find new ways to operate in the future.

Now that we are settled with most of the “big” work done, I am getting involved with the French chapter of an international organization I was a part of in Los Angeles, the International Society of Augmentative and Alternative Communication, ISAAC (www.isaac-online.org), that works to improve the life of every child and adult with speech difficulties. I volunteered to help and was invited to become a member of the bureau and named international liaison because I am the only one fluent in English, which is the language of the association. My first big test was on Oct. 4 when I was asked to make a 20-minute PowerPoint presentation at their Paris conference in French on Augmentative and Alternative Communication Awareness activities of chapters around the world. October is International Disabilities Awareness Month. From that experience, one of the participants invited me to speak at her school in Paris next week.

C.A.: Can you please describe your typical day in Ymeray?

Hal: Apples, pears and berries from the garden for breakfast. During breakfast we listen to public radio from the US on the internet. Projects and chores until 1 pm. A nice long midday meal. We are both good cooks and take turns at the stove. Some days we work until dark on the house, but about once a week we will do serious walking and exploring after lunch. There are megalithic monuments, canals built by Louis XIV and beautiful woods and streams all around. French villages present a solid wall along the road, but if you walk along the streams or along farm roads, you can see houses and gardens invisible from the road.

We go into Paris on any little excuse. We are tapering off on the *vide greniers* and *brocantes*, but we did very well going to them about every other weekend while we were furnishing the house. Now we look for *vide greniers* combined with festivals for the saint’s day of a village.

We eat a light meal late in the evening and crawl off to bed well exercised and sleepy. On rainy days when we can't work outside we make a fire and read or surf the internet. We each have a laptop computer and NO TV!

C.A.: You both did so well in adapting and you know many French people – how did you do it?

Mary Ann: Ymeray is a little village of about 500 people and has no commerce, not one café, boulangerie or tabac, so there are no natural daily gathering places. We had to learn the rhythm of the village to see how people come and go even to say bonjour to someone. Since our kitchen window faces the old town pump and has a view of the church and the mairie, we are in a good position. Few events happen daily. The *mairie* is open on Tuesdays and Fridays late afternoon. The church is used for weddings on some Saturdays and for funerals. The door to the Club de l’amitié for senior citizens is just on the other side of the pump. They meet once a month. People do like to take walks, usually in the late afternoon. School children go by at 12:30 going home for lunch. The most consistent people are the dog walkers.

Hal: We always leave the gate open, which invites people to say hello and often begins a

friendship.

Mary Ann has made friends at Church. After mass, people do not leave immediately. It is a time to share news of the week, gossip and plan get-togethers for the next week. Some acquaintances have developed into friendships. She met her “pronunciation professor”, Thérèse, at the church in Gallardon, the neighboring town. Because there is a shortage of priests in the countryside, mass rotates through village churches that otherwise remain locked most of the time.

Perhaps the biggest sign of our acceptance into the village is that the *maire*, at the request of Thérèse, gave us the keys to Ymeray’s church. We have 1 of 3 sets, one of which is at the *mairie*.

C.A.: Are you able to communicate fully in French? You mentioned to me that you have many French professors in the village...What do you mean by that?

Mary Ann: Hal has had only 2 months of French 1 at the Alliance Française but is intrepid when it comes to communicating to get things done. He learns vocabulary quickly and remembers it. He knows the name of almost every item at Leroy Merlin.

I have had 8 years of French in high school and college but very little opportunity to use it and am timid about making mistakes. I am not gifted in language, so I am a continual student. Whenever I meet someone in the village I usually say that I am in the process of learning French. I ask that they speak slowly and to please correct me when I make a mistake. Everyone is happy to help. Almost everybody offers vocabulary and corrections for verb tenses. One couple helps me with my written work, editing and laughing with me as they reword my thoughts to say things as the French do. One friend is my pronunciation professor, coaching vowel and nasal sounds as well as “r” “euil”, etc...When we have time, she has me read for her just as if I were a child. Last night was Halloween and one of the little groups who knocked on our gate included a teenager who sometimes says “Hello how are you” in lycée English as I pass the teens who hang out on Saturdays in the Place de l’église. He was with his little sisters now and said his name is Alexandre. We made a deal: I will help him with English if he will teach me French teen talk. My faculty and our friends are growing.

C.A.: You hired many local artisans to work on your house and when they finished their job, you threw a big party to thank them – how was the invitation received by them and what was the overall experience like?

Mary Ann: It was a wonderful day at the end of July – a very rainy month – and the sun shone all day. We invited 30 people and 29 came, even the Mayor who spent the entire afternoon. People included our agente immobilière, notaire, avocat, maçons, électricien, plombier, menuisier, pépinière, artists, friends and others who helped us and welcomed us. We set up tables in the barn for fear of rain and set up apéritifs, the entrée, cheeses, salad and desserts in the milking barn, with a barbecue pit outside. It was a 5-course buffet.

Each person who worked with us, paid or unpaid, became very special friends and a part of the history of the house and our adventure. The idea came to me to have little plaques made with their names and to attach them to the parts of property where they had worked. We found a local potter who made little ceramic plaques and with beautiful calligraphy and with a stem of wheat wrote on each one “Merci” and the name of the individual.

We hung them on doorways, poutres and walls. I then made a map of the property with numbers on places where the plaques were to be found and a list of names matching the numbers. It was a wonderful icebreaker. As each family arrived they began a treasure hunt to find their name.

When we see people who were there, we still receive a thank you from them and invitations to dinner at their homes. Just now, as I am writing, the phone rang and we are invited to meet our neighbor's new horse and have coffee this afternoon.

C.A.: Have you acquired any new habits since you've been in France? Which ones?

Mary Ann: Taking time to cook and eat lunch everyday. Walks in the woods. Taking time to get to know the birds who visit the garden. Staying in bed a bit later in the morning. Forgetting what day of the week it is.

C.A.: What suggestions or advice would you give to someone who is contemplating moving to France?

Hal: Learn French! Even getting to level one can help a lot. Rent a car and explore the small towns and villages before buying. Make careful note of what things cost, especially for Americans now that the dollar continues to fall. You can live frugally outside of Paris, but do you want to? Budget for travel within Europe and for dining and entertainment. If necessary, you can trim these expenses later.

Mary Ann: As you make acquaintances, entertain simply with dinners, afternoon coffees, apéritifs, or for any reason to get together as a wonderful way to enjoy people and learn new things. And, in turn, you will be invited to French homes, becoming a real member of the community.

C.A.: Anything else you would like to add?

Mary Ann: Keep the gate open.