

A conversation with Noel LeVasseur

Dr. James Paul, retired Kankakee Community College history and philosophy professor, Bourbonnais Grove Historical Society board member, Perry Farm Living History Advisory committee member and former Kankakee County Historic Preservation Commissioner, first performed this interpretive monologue at the Kankakee County Historic Preservation Commission's Bourbonnais Township public forum on April 29, 2016. Six forums were conducted by the commission in 2016 throughout Kankakee County in order to increase public understanding of why historic preservation is so important.

Among other sources, Dr. Paul used Burt Burroughs's *The Story of Kankakee's Earliest Pioneer Settlers; Introduction and Notes* by Vic Johnson (Bradley, IL: Lindsey Publications, 1986) in preparing this monologue.

Bonsoir madames, mademoiselles, et messieurs, mon amis! C'est bon etre ici. Comment allez vous? Tres bien! Je m'appelle Noel LeVasseur, Francais-Canadien et Quebecois. Aussi, je suis le citizen de Bourbonnais en Illinois. Vous comprenez? Parlez-vous Francais?

Non. Then, I will speak to you in my second language, English. Contrary to what many believe, I was not the first white person to live in the Kankakee River Valley. That noble distinction should go to one of the Bourbonnais brothers, Antoine or Francois, Sr.

When I was a teenager living in Quebec Province, I was recruited to work for the American Fur Company in 1817. By the spring of 1818, the year Illinois became a state, Gurdon Hubbard and I portaged from Lake Michigan to the Desplaines River down the Kankakee to the Iroquois where we eventually set up a trading post at Bunkum. Four years later in 1822, Antione Bourbonnais worked with Hubbard and me at the fur company's post on the Bureau River, about one mile north of later-day Hennepin.

In 1823, our fur company assigned Antoine Bourbonnais to a post on the Kankakee River. On one of my journeys along the Kankakee in the mid-1820s, I finally met Antoine's brother Francois Bourbonnais, Sr., and I remarked "...white man though he was, after many years of residence and association with the Pottawatomis, living on terms of equality and after the manner of the Indian, he had completely lost his identity as a white man".

By the time I and my associates established a Bourbonnais Grove trading house in 1834, Francois Bourbonnais, Sr. had already been living here with the natives for several years.

When the American Fur Company disbanded in 1827, Hubbard acquired all the company's Illinois assets, and in 1832, he gave me control of the post at Bunkum (later-day village of Iroquois) along the Iroquois River. Change was in the air that year of 1832.

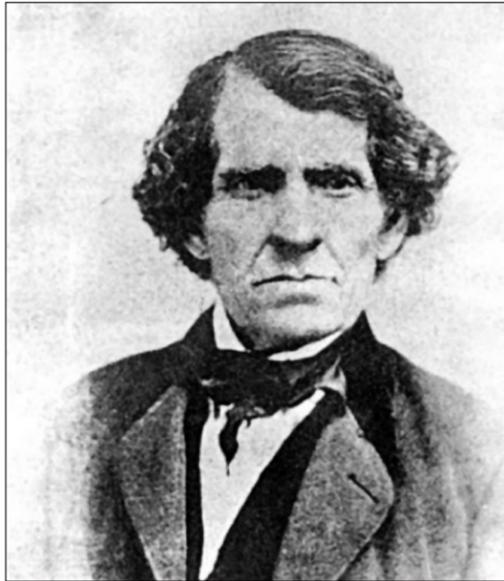
I realized that my life would change from fur trader to something else as the Potawatomi were compelled to move west of the Mississippi by the terms of the Treaty of Camp Tippecanoe.

On one of our trading expeditions to the village of Chief Shaw-waw-nas-see in 1832, our party was compelled to make camp seven miles south of Rock Creek in an area along the Chicago to Danville Rd. where the trees along the river to the west formed a point "La Pointe". I exclaimed "What a beautiful country is this in which we live!"

Two years later in 1834, I purchased that site from the Potawatomi Chief Meshekete-no. While I continued to work at the trading post on the Iroquois River, I instructed my associates, Henry Boucher and Dominick Bray, to build the Bourbonnais Grove trading house in 1834.

In 1827, I married the princess Wat-chee-kee, niece of the Potawatomi chief Tam-in. She had formerly been married to Gurdon Hubbard from 1824-26.

In 1837, we ended our ten-year marriage and I saw her to her new home across the Mississippi. Our daughter would enter a convent school in St. Louis and our two sons



Noel LeVasseur (1799-1879)

would attend college in Detroit. I soon fell in love with Ruth Russell Bull. We were married on Feb. 19, 1838. I loved her so much; I would have given her anything. The year before, during our courtship, I contracted brick mason Thomas Durham to build us an Early Classical Style house just northeast of the trading house. Durham's farmstead was located just to the south on the Chicago-Danville Rd.

When our house was completed, I invited Father Simone Lalumiere, from Vincennes, to say mass in our home in June 1837. What a proper beginning for our new home.

For the next four years until St. Leo Chapel was built, our home was also our parish church. Our two-story house had a four columned porch with spacious one-story wings on each side.

We purchased all new furnishings from Chicago that befitted this house which was not a log cabin—except one item: my comfortable old camp-chair with reclining back and upholstered in deerskin.

Ruth, I and our eight children lived happily in the house from 1838 until her death in 1860. I later married Fannie Franchere. I told her that if I should die first, she could sell our home and land to the new St. Viator College located just to the east of our home. I have lived a rich life, witnessing the transformation of Bourbonnais Grove from an agricultural settlement to an educational oasis. My daughter Lucy's father-in-law and my good friend, George Letourneau, became the incorporated village's first mayor in 1875.

The day before I died on Dec. 18, 1879, I rose from my bed and asked Prosper Senesac to "Go, get P'tit ga and bring him to me—I would like to see him again." P'tit ga or "little boy" was my term of endearment for Doncero, my favorite horse.

Since I could not move, Prosper nudged Doncero up the porch steps through the front door and over the hardwood floor to my bed where Fannie and my children had gathered with me. I held his head close and stroked his nose murmuring "Oh mon, P'tit ga, we have had many good time together. Ah la, la, la... Auvoir, mon amis!"

The Bourbonnais Grove Historical Society is dedicated to preserving and promoting local history. Monthly meetings are held at 7 p.m. on the first Thursday of each month March to December. Museum hours are 1 to 4 p.m., first and third Sundays of each month, March to December or by appointment. Visit bourbonnaishistory.org, facebook.com/bourbonnaishistory or call 1-815-933-6452.

Candidates file

The general municipal election will be held Tuesday, April 4, 2017.

Bradley

Incumbent mayor Bruce Adams, democrat, will seek another term. Also filing for mayor was current trustee Mike Watson, Progressive Citizens Party candidate.

Village clerk Mike LaGesse, democrat, will be opposed by Progressive Citizens Party candidate Julie Tambling.

There are three open trustee positions. For trustee, incumbent democrats Bob Redmond and Eric Cyr filed and incumbent Melissa Carrico will file as an independent.

Progressive Citizens Party trustee candidates are Donald Barber, Brian Tieri and David Schultz.

Bourbonnais

Incumbent mayor Paul Schore, Bourbonnais Citizens

Party, will seek another term. Also running for mayor is trustee Jeff Keast, republican.

There are three open seats for trustee. Candidates are incumbents and Bourbonnais Citizens Party members Bruce Greenlee and Rick Fischer and newcomer Angie Serafini and for clerk, incumbent Brian Simeur.

Also running for trustee are republicans Mike Zenz, Brad Arthur and Chris Deschand.

Kankakee

Democratic candidates for mayor are fifth ward alderwoman Chasity Wells-Armstrong, Jarman Porter, former alderman Dexter Thompson and Kankakee County board member Robert Ellington-Snipes. A primary election will be held Feb. 28.

The winner will face republican and incumbent mayor Nina Epstein.

Pato retires



Photo courtesy of village of Bradley

Pato, one of the Bradley police department's K-9 officers, officially retired Monday, Nov. 28, 2016 after seven years of service. Pato received a plaque of appreciation. Pato and his handler Bradley police officer Brandon O'Connor received a retirement send-off from fellow K9 officer Riggs and his handler Bradley police officer John Cox. Fellow K9 officers from the city of Kankakee and the Illinois State Police were also in attendance. Pato, a Belgian Malinois, was donated to the Bradley police department by KAMEG. He will continue to live with officer O'Connor and his family. Riggs and Pato are trained and certified through the Illinois State Police in tracking, building searches, area searches, article searches, obedience, suspect apprehension, handler protection and narcotics detection.

Our Savior Lutheran events

Our Savior Lutheran Church, 975 W. Brookmont Blvd., Bradley, has announced the following December events:

The women's group will hold a Christmas celebration on Saturday, Dec. 10 at 10 a.m. with entertainment and a gift exchange following.

If you are alone, either through the death of a spouse or other life circumstances, join the church's WITT—We're in this Together—group on Saturday, Dec. 10 at 2 p.m. as they attend "Sounds of the Season" in the Centennial Chapel at Olivet Nazarene University.

Kankakee Quilt Makers meet

The Kankakee Quilt Makers Guild will meet Thursday, Dec. 8 at 6 p.m. at Calvary Bible Church, 2587 E. Armour Rd., Bourbonnais. The December meeting will be the Guild's Make it, Bake it, Sew it, Grow it Banquet meeting. Members are encouraged to bring a dish to share. Also, bring a friend and your checkbook to participate in the silent auction. There will be wonderful gifts to purchase.

Contact Laurie Vandergriff for more details at 1-708-774-1009.