

An American (Chemical Engineer) in Paris

By: Benjamin A. Horwitz

In August of 1975, I arrived in Paris to begin a nine-month assignment working on the engineering of a European polymer plant for Amoco (pronounced AmOco, with a long first “O”, by the French). The company I was working for, H.K.Ferguson, had had a Paris office since the early 1950s. Yes, it was a difficult assignment, especially for a 30 year-old, single chemical engineer, but someone had to do it!

Just a comment to you young Chem E’s who’ll soon be beginning your careers. I have found the following to be true, not only in my own experience, but also with many individuals I’ve come into contact with over the 34 years I’ve been plying this trade. If the possibility of an assignment begins to circulate in the office, and you think you may be interested, never indicate or show that interest to anyone in the office, especially your superiors. In fact, if you think you may be a possible candidate for this assignment, get the word out fast that you may have difficulty accepting it.

Secretly, however, pack your bags and be ready to leave on a moment’s notice, which is usually all the notice you’ll receive. If your boss broaches the subject, don’t put her or him off, but indicate a possible conflict or difficulty with your availability – family situation ... whatever. This will insure that you are almost immediately considered for the assignment. On the other hand, the converse is especially true. If you indicate your enthusiasm and interest, your chances of being selected are remote. This reverse psychology can, of course, be useful if you don’t want a particular assignment.

So, desperately wanting to go to Paris, I took the advise just espoused from an older, wiser associate and played it coy, indicating possible problems with an overseas assignment to my boss (while secretly purchasing the Paris *Michelin Guide*). And sure enough, true to the script, that Friday I was asked to be in Paris on Monday morning. This, of course, presented absolutely no problems, since my bags had been packed for almost a week. Good bye Cleveland; hello, City of Lights!

I arrived in Paris early Sunday morning. Ferguson’s offices were in the suburb of Issy-les-Moulineaux. For you Francophiles, this area of Paris is located at the end of the Metro line known as Maire d’Issy. Issy-les-Moulineaux is a working class suburb of Paris, and the local hotel was only

a ten-minute walk to our offices. Later, I moved to a hotel/apartment in the 15th Arrondissement. This location was indeed more comfortable, since it had a kitchen and a view of the Seine. Hemingway himself may have stayed in or written about a hotel like this. The name of the hotel, I believe, was the Plaza Mirabeau and I would highly recommend it to anyone who is considering a visit to Paris.

The Ferguson offices in Paris were located in a modern building and were quite comfortable. Arriving at the offices the very same day I began work was the newly appointed Ferguson Paris manager. He was an American who must have recently graduated *magna cum laude* from the Ugly American University. It was his intention, from day one, to run this office like an “American-run engineering office”, whatever the hell that meant. The Parisians, on the other hand, had different ideas. The conflict began almost immediately. By the end of that first week, the place was in utter turmoil.

One of the lovely customs at the French office, and I imagine at all French offices, was the friendly and cordial greeting in the morning. With coffee cups in hand, the custom was to walk about the office greeting one another with the usual “Bonjour, como sava?” This activity lasted for 20 or 30 minutes, with people mingling and chatting and passing on the morning greeting. It was really quite pleasant. Of course, this upset the new American manager, no end. It was a waste of time as far as he was concerned. And, with several Amoco representatives from the States permanently stationed in our offices, he was going to make an immediate impression, which he certainly did, except it was a bad one. One of the ironies of this gentleman, who shall remain nameless, was that his last name was obviously of French extraction – an embarrassment to all the French in the office.

Undaunted by his initial failure, he continued to try to “Americanize” the office by padlocking the underground garage entrances at exactly 8:00 in the morning, making anyone late sign in with the concierge at the front desk. This too lasted less than a week. One day soon after the garage entrances were locked, it seemed half the Paris Fire Department came storming into the offices - fully regaled in their splendid uniforms – boots, rain coats, hats. I didn’t speak much French, but it was apparent this was no formal invitation to the Fire Fighters’ Ball. It seems the worker’s committee (office workers are organized in most French business concerns in something similar to, but not exactly like, a union) called the Fire Department and reported the locking of the garage doors. This was apparently a violation of the fire

codes, since it could prevent a proper exit from the building in case of fire. Round two to the French.

Eventually, a truce was called between Mr. Ugly American and the French in the office, but it remained tenuous, to say the least.

Day Work vs. Night Life

I was involved with the drying section of the polymer facility. The major piece of equipment in this section was the fluid bed dryer, a very large piece of equipment that could only be brought down to the construction site from Germany via the European Barge Canal system. This piece of equipment became my major responsibility and I had to work closely with the manufacturer to be sure the specifications were met.

The French engineers I worked with were quite helpful, despite the hard feelings developed because of the new Fegruson Paris manager. Except for an occasional language barrier, things progressed quite smoothly. Actually, communicating with the French Chemical Engineers was quite easy, since many of the reference books they used in college were the same as the ones most American Universities used. Because of this, their “technical English” was quite good. The pace was perhaps a bit less hectic and more relaxed than what I was used to back in the Cleveland office, but I don’t believe it really effected the schedule.

Perhaps, like many people assigned to work in Paris for the first time, I made the mistake of trying to see all of the city, like a tourist, while simultaneously working a 9 to 5 job. Also, to make matters worse, I fell in with a bunch of rather eccentric expatriates at the office. One in particular, who took me under his wing, was married to a French woman, spoke fluent French, and had lived in Paris for several years. After work we would head to his favorite watering hole at a quaint little hotel just off the Champs Elysses. (The name escapes me.) Here I became involved with a cast of characters you might find in a John Le Carre novel. At least, that is, if you believed the stories they could spin after several rounds of drinks. I was, of course, a willing and eager listener. The table in the bar of the hotel seemed to be reserved daily for this entourage. Believe me, this was no Paris version of the Algonquin Round Table. But it certainly was exciting and entertaining. When Phil Griffith my mentor and I would arrive, the conversational language changed from French to English, for my benefit. Phil as I mentioned before was fluent in French.

One of the charter members of this group was an Egyptian by the name of Sam Sasoon. I would guess he was perhaps in his late 60s, early 70s.

During the 1940s, Mr Sasoon was a minister in the Egyptian government of King Farouk. I had no reason to doubt this story, although I was always a bit suspicious. But Sam was a captivating story-teller, like everyone else at the round table. Occasionally some fully robed Arab sheik would come to the table, speak in Arabic, grab Sam's hand, and kiss the back of it. This was pretty convincing of Sam's one time status in the Arab world. But even more bizarre, I found out later that Sasoon is a Jewish surname. A famous Jewish surname throughout the Arab world. Sam Sasoon was a Jew! And even better; Sam Sasoon's storied life, compared to the other character/expatriates sitting around the table, was rather mundane.

By the time the imbibing and story telling was over, and we began our search for a suitable eating establishment, it was almost ten in the evening. And by the time the dining and after dinner carousing were over, it was early the next morning. I barely had time to get a few hours sleep before I had to make the ten-minute trek to the office. I was, by far, the youngest member of this motley group. How Sam Sasoon and some of the others maintained this pace is still a mystery that has consumed me the past 25 years!

It was, indeed, an exciting and adventuresome existence, and I surely got to see parts of Paris that I'm sure native Parisians have never seen. But it quickly took its toll on me. After several months of this, I decided my health couldn't take this schedule any longer. I had become friends with another engineer and his wife who had come to Paris from Ferguson's San Francisco office. Jim Herring and his wife Carole lived at the Plaza Mirabeau and convinced me to move there, which I did. Soon I began to adopt a more conservative lifestyle; working Monday through Friday, and saving the weekend for sightseeing and adventure.

Jim Herring is one of the finest all-around engineers I've ever worked with. His life as a chemical engineer took him all over the world doing precisely what we were doing in Paris, i.e. engineering, designing, and building a chemical plant. Jim taught me how to work with foreign nationals and vendors...how to cook...how to be respectful of other's customs and ways...how not to assume the American way is the best (even if you think it is). And, most importantly, he taught me how to put all this knowledge together to engineer and design plants – anywhere in the world.

One of things I remember from those Paris days, and in fact the only tangible thing I've kept all these years, is a copy of something Jim wrote one afternoon in one of his pensive moods. He spent that afternoon writing in long hand a 15 or 20 page report entitled: "How to Engineer a Chemical Plant – Highlights." It has since been formally typed and passed around to many engineers, all of who unanimously agree it is a priceless and timeless

document. I have never attempted, nor would I ever attempt, to begin engineering on a chemical project without scrupulously following Jim's outline, nor should anyone else. It is a masterpiece in logic and simplicity. And the older I get and the more experience I obtain, the more priceless those nine pages become. Jim is now 81 and in failing health, but those nine pages will forever keep him in the minds of us lucky enough to have a copy, and to have worked on a project with Jim.

The days and weeks passed quickly. Paris soon became just another city in which to work, and the Eiffel Tower was just another edifice one passed on the way. The winter was mild and spring was slow to arrive. My work on the drying section of the plant was completed and April seemed like a good and proper month in which to bid Paris, *adieu*.

I had found out by contacting the Cleveland office before departing Paris, that I was being considered for an immediate assignment to help start up a wastewater facility in Fairfield, Alabama. I was not up to Fairfield, Alabama after the past nine months. Upon my return to the Cleveland office, I immediately let it be known that Fairfield, Alabama was a place I've wanted to go to all my life, especially for a wastewater startup. To this day, I have never visited nor worked in Fairfield, Alabama.

Note: This article was based on a series of “inspirational” talks to the senior chemical engineering classes at Case Western Reserve University and Cleveland State University. Later it was turned into an article published by the American Institute of Chemical Engineers in their publication *Chapter One*. It has recently been updated for this web site.