

Solo traveler explores world's byways

By HELEN ZUCKER

I don't know how the odd notion that librarians lead quiet lives came into being.

The adventures of Jane French, head of the business office at Bloomfield Township Public Library, remind me of chapters from T. E. Lawrence's "Arabia Deserta," or Alan Moorehead's "The Blue Nile."

Like Lawrence of Arabia and Moorehead, Ms. French, a reserved, bright-eyed woman, seems to have a romantic, irresistible urge to travel in solitary fashion and let the chips fall where they may.

Discovery is the name of the game for serious readers and Ms. French will share a generous portion of her many discoveries on Tuesday, Sept. 18, and Sept. 25 at 7:30 p.m. in the Green Room of the Bloomfield Township Library.

Ms. French's first travel talk will be on her recent journey to the South Pacific. She has color slides and a taped commentary on what Fiji, Tonga, Tahiti, Moorea, Bora Bora, American Samoa and Western Samoa are like in 1979.

Like the classic travel writer, Ger-

trude Bell, who wandered through Syria in 1907, Ms. French has boundless curiosity, strong legs, and a dream that she "will return to her next life as a dark-haired, multi-lingual lady."

MS. FRENCH'S SECOND talk, "From Kuwait to Bali," includes slides of Arabs riding camels past gas pumps near the world's largest oil port in Bahrain. So much for dealing with the gas war.

The desert fascinates Ms. French. So do the Bedouins who have very strong roots in the sands. City Bedouins on vacation pack tents on their cars and head for the desert.

Ms. French described it as "unlike anything we know of in the United States. The Arabian desert is filled with strange, heavy shapes. It has a dry, wild quality. There's nothing pretty about it. Yet," she says, "I learn about myself when encountering people and plants I've never come in contact with before. Prettiest, child-chat stops mattering in the desert. Maybe it's because I'm an American," she smiled, "and I know I'm going home to a country that, despite everything I've seen is

still the best in many ways. That makes me want to merge with the culture I'm visiting so much."

During the past year she has gone swimming in the Indian Ocean, attended a Malaysian wedding, and in Singapore, saw the Chinatown used in the movie "Saint Jack." She has slept in Saurian fates (a fate is an open-air thatched hut), sailed in outrigger canoes, and brought back slides and comments about everything.

Ms. French grew up traveling. Her parents, inveterate campers, toured the U. S. from the Atlantic to the Pacific, then took in Canada and Mexico. She said she considers it important to know your own country well before departing for other shores. And she reads maps the way other people read cookbooks or science fiction.

"THERE ARE THREE STAGES to a trip," Ms. French said, "the planning stage when excitement builds and plans take shape; the second stage, the trip itself, the inevitable surprises, and the third stage — remembering — taking it all in and sorting out what I've seen. I've always wanted to stay longer, never felt there was time enough to see everything."

She has never gone on a guided tour, though she uses an agent to book her flights. She never gets homesick while traveling. She has a gift for relating one to one, and said she gets a deep thrill when people accept her as one of them. The Bloomfield Library sent books and clothing to a young girl in Sri Lanka Ms. French befriended. She has been traveling alone for 20 years. Her first solo trip was to Paris.

Ms. French smiled in a puckish way and looked ready to burst into one of Gene Kelly's "American in Paris" numbers as she said, "A bit of my heart has always remained in Paris. It's my favorite city. Lima is second. Both are so rich in culture and sophistication they lend themselves to endless exploration." She considers Rio and Venice the world's most beautiful cities; Calcutta, Fez, and Hong Kong, the most exciting.

Occasionally the excitement has gotten "a bit out of hand," but, Ms. French, a plucky lady, has learned how to handle herself in emergencies.

ON MAY DAY in LaPaz, Bolivia, she found herself borne along by "militant, shouting crowds flowing like a human river toward the Central Plaza."

Spotting a small shop, she clambered up the staircase and "looked inconspicuous as the crowd streamed by. She was too interested to be 'really afraid.'" She keeps abreast of politics and tries to know what's afoot in the country in which she's traveling.

The only time Ms. French recalls being frightened was in a mud-walled

village on the Upper Nile. She'd wandered into a dark room filled with silent people and couldn't find the one door.

She pretended to take pictures as the people slowly crowded around her. No one spoke, and as the crowd got closer, she spotted a chicken pecking its way toward a corner. "The chicken disappeared, and Ms. French made tracks in the direction of the chicken and darted out the door and out of the village. She managed to make this episode sound like a Woody Allen adventure and talks of this scary situation with a sense of amusement."

The only other "apprehensive moments" she has experienced took place in Kenya. Stuck in a small car on a hammock as rhinos headed in her direction, thoughts of Hemingway's "Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" came to mind. The rhinos must have had the wits to know that Ms. French was needed back in Michigan, they suddenly changed course and veered off in search of another victim.

Ms. French wishes she knew more than the common phrases of all the countries she has been in.

"Language is the key to really getting on," she said.

But from listening to her, it is obvious that an inquiring, friendly nature is just as important, and if Ms. French does return in her next life as a "dark-haired, multi-lingual lady," she will probably wind up as President of the U.N.

SHE HAS ENJOYED eating with peasants at street fairs as well as sharing a table with Lord and Lady Ballantrae, the former Governor-General of New Zealand.

In this life, she recommends felucca rides up the Nile on soft, starry nights, early morning boat rides on the Ganges in Benares, seaplane flights over the Norwegian fjords, and small plane flights through (not over) the Andes. "Oh," she added, "anyone who has the luck to stop over in Fiji shouldn't miss eating at Scotts in Suva."

As for her "roots," she was born in Illinois, grew up (between trips) in Michigan, and graduated from Lake Forest College. She calls herself "a native of the Bloomfield Township Public Library."

Having worked there for 10 years, she "has probably spent more time in the stacks than anywhere else. The up-to-date travel information, maps, reference materials are a great advantage."

But there are more deserts and roads to be explored, and Ms. French is always planning a trip to a country she hasn't seen. Her talks promise to be fascinating.

The library is located at 1099 Lone Pine, Bloomfield Hills. For information, call 641-5800.

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From the Wine Press

by Richard Watson

Wine books bring an added dimension

While certainly not on par with drinking, one of the many ancillary pleasures of wine is reading about it.

But, it's more than a pleasure, intelligent consumption demands a bit of study here and there to learn about grapes, vineyards, growing regions and more.

Reading about wine doesn't teach you how to appreciate it, however. Only tasting can do that. But maps, vintage dates, and personalities are another dimension of wine, a background against which to taste. And a good wine book makes a fine companion to a glass of Chardonnay in the evening. Hence this and following articles aimed at wine literature.

Signet Paperbacks has two excellent introductory books, an "Encyclopedia of Wine" and a "Guide to American Wines." Both published in 1978, they are no longer particularly up-to-date, but both are reasonably accurate and generally more informative.

You can spend a lot more (these are

\$2.25 each) and do a lot worse.

Also in paperback, and at a very reasonable price, is Hugh Johnson's "The World Atlas of Wine." At \$7.95, the book is loaded with maps and details of the world's wine regions. The original hard cover was published in 1971 by Simon and Schuster and was revised in 1978. It now sells for \$29.95, making the soft cover a bargain for a book less dependent on last-minute accuracy than some others. Statistical data and wine region maps don't go out of date very rapidly.

Another recently released, Second Edition, however, is worth buying carrying as it does 25 percent new material and including information on some 200 new wineries bonded since the first edition. This is Leon Adams' "The Wines of America" (McGraw-Hill, 1978, second edition, \$14.95) compendium of non-judgmental, informative data on the people and places of the United States world of wine. Even 13 pages on Michigan — out of nearly 600, this isn't inordinate.

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