

Donor Profile **JOSEPH L. PEYSER:** **CITOYEN DU MONDE**

Citizen of the World

In 1977, Joseph L. Peyser, French and education professor at Indiana University, South Bend, and an expert on Fort St. Joseph, embarked on a fascinating journey into the 17th and 18th century experience of the French in North America that became the crown jewel of his life's interest and work.

He began by translating French-language documents for the Niles, Michigan Historical Commission relating to Fort St. Joseph, which led to the publication of *Letters from New France: The Upper Country 1686-1783* (University of Illinois Press, 1992). He wrote grant applications, translated hundreds of French-language documents, helped to explain the site's history, and encouraged Support the Fort (a group of citizens committed to reconstructing Fort St. Joseph in the Four Flags area) to persist in their commitment to find the original site of Fort St. Joseph. Built in 1691, Fort St. Joseph stood for 90 years and was the only site in Michigan ruled by four countries--France, England, the United States, and Spain--and was used mostly for trading furs.

Dr. Peyser discovered, through documents housed in the National Archives of France, that Fort St. Joseph was located on the east bank of the St. Joseph River. His discovery prompted a team of archaeologists from Western Michigan University, led by Dr. Michael Nassaney, to search the east bank and discover conclusive evidence of the Fort's material remains. The site currently is being excavated and documented by a team

of WMU archaeologists including Dr. Nassaney.

"What we didn't know is that people had been looking for the Fort for 100 years," said Nassaney. He also didn't know there were no maps showing the location of the outpost, or even outlining the layout of the settlement.

The documents, showing the approximate location, which Dr. Peyser uncovered and translated, were written in Old French, which is significantly different from today's French. These documents revealed what life was like in 17th and 18th century Michigan and Canada and were from all walks of life—from French government and royalty, businessmen and blacksmiths, to women engaged in trade.

"Some of the documents were extremely difficult," Dr. Peyser said in an April 2003 interview with the South Bend Tribune. "The letters don't look like today's writing at all, and the grammar has changed since the 17th century. The use of tenses is different, and there were many obsolete words. I really expanded my vocabulary."

The Peyser family awarded the WMU archaeology department \$10,000 for the dewatering the Fort St. Joseph site. The dewatering grant will fund a system of pumps and

pipes that will drain the wetlands before excavation of the soils and sediments at Fort St. Joseph occurs. The dewatering of the Fort St. Joseph archaeological site has been funded for the 2006 WMU field study season by the Peyser family in memory and honor of Dr.

Joseph L. Peyser who died Dec. 27, 2004.

"He was a man who believed in grabbing hold of life and living it, according to his own rules," said his son Randall Peyser. "He always said to define yourself by your own interests and skills, not by others or your job." Offered lucrative positions

by his father and uncles' businesses while in college, the senior Dr. Peyser turned them down to pursue his intellectual love, French language and culture.

A man of many talents and interests, Dr. Peyser attained the rank of Eagle Scout as a boy, earning every merit badge the Boy Scouts of America offered at the time. As a teen he took 100 mile bicycle rides from New York City where he grew up before the advent of multi-speed bikes. He loved to play chess and bridge and hike in the woods. He was an avid football and boxing fan. He also enjoyed drawing cityscapes and portraits that are exhibited in his home. His daughter, Jan Peyser, also fondly recalls her father carving toys out of wood for the Peyser children, including a dollhouse and an old medieval fort.

Dr. Peyser and his wife believed in the global quality of all people.



Drs. Joseph and Julie Peyser pictured here in 2001.