

**A story by Constance Victoria Monlezun Darbonne of she and husbands trip to Southern France in 2004 to visit Lalanne, the home of Dominique Monlezun, her great grandfather, and to Monlezun, France.**

## AND SO WE WILL GATHER

“It began with a dream of foreign travel and ended back in my hometown of Lake Arthur, Louisiana. This is a story of finding family.

I am “half German, half French”. My mother, Gertrude Hensgens Monlezun, knew about *her* family back to the 1600’s, and had been to Germany, visiting her ancestral home site. My father went with her. It was the “half French” that I knew very little about. What follows is the discovery of the “other half”.

In 1968, I met a fellow freshman at McNeese State University in Lake Charles named Lindy Giles Erickson. It was also the year I met a junior, my future husband, Vic Darbonne. Lindy and I kept up with each other through the years. She had moved to Angers, France in 1999 to be closer to her husbands work in Russia. She had been inviting Vic and me to visit her in France for the past five years. We put it off for many reasons, but the right time presented itself in March of 2004. We said it would be our thirtieth and one half-year anniversary trip.

As we planned our first European travel, I became interested in finding out where my great grandfather, Dominique Monlezun, was for the first 21 years of his life. After all, I would be visiting the country that he left in 1866 to come to America. His brother, Pascal, had emigrated 10 years before him. All anyone knew was that “Grandpa Dominique was French Basque, and came from Tarbes in Southern France, on the French side of the Pyrenees Mountains”, as my dad, Lee J. Monlezun use to say. The name of Tarbes was on the passport. That was enough to *want* to go, but where? The why was easy.

Our family had discovered Grandpa Dominique’s original passport, a treasured document to myself my seven siblings, and cousins. I took a passport copy to my friend, Danielle Miller. She was from Belgium and had married Vic’s friend, Randy, from Citgo Lab. She worked at the Public Library in Maplewood. I asked her to help me translate the French passport. Three months before our departure date of March 28, she and Randy came over to help us plan our trip. I wrote as she dictated the translation of the French passport. Her mother had helped since she was familiar with the handwriting that was used during the 1800’s in France. She could not quite make out all of the letters of the town he was from. She said that Tarbes was where the passport *was issued*, *not* where he was from. *That* crucial name was covered with dark tape in a crease of the document. She took the passport back with her. She found a map of all of the villages in the Hautes Pyrenees area of Southern France. She knew the town’s name started with “Lala....”. She figured out that the only village that fit was *Lalanne*, in the southwestern corner of France. It was near Tarbes, where he had gone to obtain the passport. We had the name of his hometown!

Suddenly, our trip to France went from tourist to ancestral expedition! Like my dad, my husband would also be with me. Why not try to get to these villages, if they still existed. And ...could we meet Darbonnes in France? Vic's cousin had found an Arbonne, France and had spoken to a Darbonne there. So much to see in just 2 weeks! Daunting, but we were determined.

Danielle downloaded the white pages of the Monlezuns in "the parishes" and surrounding area of Lalanne. What a help she was! Indeed, many Monlezuns appeared on the list. Now what? Who are these people? What do they do? Do they know the story of Dominique? Are we related? Our "vacation" was turning into a mission of discovery.

In February of 2004, 6 weeks before our departure, Grandpa Dominique's grandson, J.T., (Junior) Monlezun, died. He was the son of Theodore, Dominique's fourth child, and was my dad's first cousin. They had all grown up on Monlezun Street in Lake Arthur. In visiting with his wife, Margaret, and daughter, Yvonne Monlezun Guillory of Houston, we talked of our impending trip to France. I told her of my quest to find out more about the family and that I had the name of his hometown, Lalanne. Yvonne's face lit up! She told me of the genealogical work she had been doing on the Monlezun Family. She had the name of our great grandmother, Dominique's wife, of most of the towns of our other ancestors and their names! She said that she would send me some information of what she had discovered. I was incredulous and so grateful for her curiosity and tenacity. One month before our departure, a large package from Yvonne arrived in the mail. In it was a treasure chest of information on the Monlezuns, back to 1769 in the town of Lalanne, France. It included the names of the grandmothers and grandfathers, and the towns they were from. Included was a copy of a Michelin map with *Vidou, Maihle, Lalanne, Trie-sur-Baise and Monlezun*. My great-great-grandmother now had a name, and her village was next to *Lalanne* in the town of *Vidou*. Also included in the packet was Dominique's and his wife's, Louisa Petersons' birth certificates! What work Yvonne had done! What timing for Vic and me to really be able to visit specific areas, complete with phone numbers! It was a Godsend. It was pure gift. Our treasure map was complete. I copied all of the information and sent it to my seven siblings and first cousins. I felt it was imperative to share all of this before we left. I was going for everyone. I was hoping these villages had someone I could meet, or had paved roads to get to them!

Five days before we left, I was spending the night on Arthur Ave. in Lake Arthur, in the home where I grew up. I was tired and ready for bed. I work as a nurse practitioner with my brother, Dominique's wife, Tina King Monlezun, also a nurse practitioner, at the Lake Arthur Health Clinic. I eyed the pile of paper that I had been going through, one box at a time. I thought, "Okay, just one more box, but only one folder". I opened it, and there was, on the top, information on Henri Chappelle, which was the site of Alvin Monlezun's grave in Belgium. He was my dad's brother who was killed in action in WWII. There, just underneath, was a map that was labeled *Bayonne and Barritz, France*...two towns Vic and I had planned to visit. I opened it and saw writing in the top margin with an arrow that said, "Monlezun". It pointed to the village of *Monlezun* with a

square around the name. It was a map of *all* of the villages in the area we were about to explore. No one remembers ever seeing this map or how it became part of my parents' papers. But there it was. Timing is everything, but I know I was directed to the map *that* night as surely as I know my name. My stunned gaze went upward and I said "Okay, okay! I'm going!"

As Vic and I packed, I carefully placed my treasury of Yvonne's research, maps, pictures of my family in my backpack. It was as important as my passport! No bungling luggage handler for the Airlines was going to get this and send it God knows where! Besides, God knows where He wanted me to go. He gave me a patient, loving husband to help get me there...not to mention a friend to be with us the entire trip...Lindy. He placed documents in my hand at the perfect time.

On March 27, 2004 we departed for France, flying out of Lake Charles. When we flew over Nova Scotia, Vic and I reflected on our families who came from there. The Broussard and Miller families were from Port Royal, Acadia, on my paternal grandmother's side, Victoria Broussard Monlezun. Victoria is my paternal grandmother, from the Grand Chenier ridge, and I carry her name, Constance Victoria. (I hope I have her longevity. She died at age 105.) The ocean we were crossing in comfort, complete with movies, food served to us, and at 650 mph, was not in the wildest dreams of all of our families who had gone before. I imagined the boat as I looked at the Atlantic. We were living the rest of the story.

We arrived 9 hours later in Paris. Lindy brought us to her home in Angers. Two days later, we took a train to Bayonne at southwestern tip of France then rented a car. We visited Arbonne, 10 minutes away, and met the Mayor (*mairie*) in the town's lovely 400-year-old church. Vic was "of Arbonne" (d'Arbonne), as Darbonne is now spelled. In the cemetery were familiar names like Lemaire, Lafarge, Lafort, and Laborde. We left the next day to find the Monlezun roots.

We drove to Tarbes, the large city where Dominique had obtained his passport in 1866 for 10 francs. The ancient church was magnificent. The buildings were multicolored, most with the burnt sienna and Colombia blue trim on the shutters. We drove to "Pharmacie Monlezun" that was listed on our white pages from the area. We were getting out of the car, and Lindy said, "Lets go meet your family". And so we did. We met the pharmacist, Emilie Monlezun. I showed her my driver's license. She gave a big smile when I showed her the name of Jean Monlezun. She said in French, "That is my father-in-law. He is at work. I'll call him and get a time you can meet." She came back and said that 4 o'clock would be fine with Jean. The first connection was made. Lindy said she had never helped others with heritage trips that had success so early. So off we went again to meet and greet.

As we ate in a village named Chelle-Debat, near Lalanne, the locals stared and smiled. A dog and a cat came in and out. Nobody was over 5 foot 4 inches. I knew we were in the right territory! We ate delicious, fresh food for 10 euro's each. Butane bottles were in a barn made with massive beams attached to the building. Of course, I took pictures. My

dad had a butane business, and my brother, Dominique, carried on the business in Lake Arthur, LA. So, we were off to find the first Dominique's hometown a few kilometers away.

The green rolling hills, stone houses, ducks, and farm equipment dotted the area as we headed east. Suddenly, after only 10 minutes, there was the sign, *Vidou*, my great great-grandmother's hometown, Dominique's mother. I had known her name only a few weeks prior. We went to the cemetery next to the church. There, we walked up onto Marie Mailhe's gravesite, Dominique's mother. It was an experience that goes to your core being, and I could not speak... only pray a prayer of thanksgiving. She and her husband, Dominique Barthelemy Monlezun had said goodbye to their 2 sons when they left for America. They never saw them again. They let them go, I'm sure, with much trepidation. I came back, 139 years later, to tell her that her sacrifice was appreciated and bore good fruit for generations to come. Other names in the cemetery of Abadie, Nogaro, and Navarre bore witness to grandmothers of the Monlezuns. I was surrounded by legacy so rich I could scarcely take it in. Each grave was immaculately kept.

We arrived in Lalanne which is 3 minutes from Vidou. Small stone farmhouses with pristine fields and fence lines were on the narrow road. In the center of town was the Catholic Church and cemetery as it was all over Southern France. The grave of a Marie and Pierre Monlezun was found from 1898. Also, Michell Monlezun 1903, Damien 1937, Adolphe 1874, and Paul 1900. The inscriptions on many headstones were worn away. Dominique Barthelemy was buried there in 1884, but I could not find the gravesite. So many ancestors surrounded me; I again felt one with all of them. In France, due to space and financial constraints, families are buried together under the same gravesite. Hundreds of years of family were buried together, surrounded by the ancient stone wall that defined the holy ground. The Catholic Church in Lalanne, where our ancestors attended Mass, were baptized, confirmed, married and buried, was simple but beautiful. Alas, the door was locked. There was a barn attached, I could see stacks of beautiful lumber, meticulously arranged. There were and are many carpenters who love wood. My husband, his father, and his grandfathers are no different. An ancient sickle leaned up against the door, next to the wood. It looked as if it had just been used. This simple tool was not out of place.

We left with the white pages of Monlezuns in the area in hand, now with notes on it, anxious to make contact. Lindy was exited too. She was searching with us. Since we had no map, we stopped a beautiful young lady named Leticia Boutte, a 15 year old, on her motor bike. She was by her home and called her mother down to our car to help us. We asked if she knew a Jean Monlezun who owed "Monlezun and Son" agricultural equipment company. She did, and told her daughter to lead the way. She took us the back way into the next town, Trie-sur-Baise, 3 minutes away. The villages in southern France are no more than a "morning horse ride away." I'm sure it's where my ancestors "went to town" on market day in the town square.

Leticia guided us to the entrance to a lovely home on the river Baise. There we met Jean and Yvette Monlezun, a handsome, friendly couple both in their 70's. Jean had just retired and his son, Claude, was running the business. Claude and his wife lived in the

back of the property, along the banks of the River Baise. Yvette gave us pages of ancestor's names back to 1699, researched by Jean's nephew, Jacques Monlezun of Dawson Creek, British Columbia. Among the listing were the names of my ancestors, back to 1699. I had to stop looking at it! It was time to toast to their generosity in sharing this, and to new found family. They gave Vic and me a bottle of wine. The label said "Chevalier Monlezun" 1990, a Bordeaux wine bottled by E et J. Alphand, Viticulteurs of St. Sulpice and Cameyae that Jacques had given them.

We drank Armagnac, a clear, sweet, potent, cognac-type drink. There is an Armagnac in France, from the House of Janneau, founded in 1855. It is aged in oaken casks made from the oak harvested from the Forest of Monlezun, southwest of Monlezun d' Armagnac. This forest and town are located about an hour northwest of Monlezun, France. My niece, Anna Monlezun and her husband, Jason Thibodeaux visited this quaint village in June 2004. There are many chateaus and vineyards along the way. There are Monlezuns buried there also.

After visiting, taking pictures, and singing Cajun French songs and the French national anthem that my father taught me, Yvette took us to visit Pierre and Renee Monlezun in the middle of the town of Trie. They were both in their 80's. Their home was surrounded by a tall, white wrought iron fence with "PM" on the gate. The daughter and her family lived in a home connected by a walkway. Yvette greeted them with hugs. They spoke rapidly about current events and people in the town. They knew they were cousins, but could not say how. Lindy interpreted for us as we discussed life in France and why people emigrated. The same reasons kept coming up. In the mid 1800's, taxes were extremely high, there was going to be a conscription of young men to fight the Austrians, there was persecution of Catholics, and jobs were scarce. Besides, there were places in Southern Louisiana where land was inexpensive and people spoke French!

There are, as Yvette said, "beaucoup, beaucoup Monlezuns" in France. But, it was difficult to know how they were all related. Many records of the Catholic Churches were destroyed for fear of retaliation or by new regimes. So much ancestral history was lost through that means. But, they had 100's of years to research, and I was interested only in the last 139 in America. My task wasn't as daunting. Surely I could find Dominique's or even Pascal's family in America. At that large wooden kitchen table, sitting with cousins, the idea of a family reunion of the Monlezun in the United States was born. I came 10,000 miles to find where it had all begun, so why not go home and find out where they are now. It was time.

Yvette then took us to her family business, "*Monlezun et fils*", an agricultural equipment company in the middle of town, next to the hotel. The logo, a large *M* shaped like a mountain with a river running through it. We walked in, and the smell hit me. It was my father's store in Lake Arthur...tires, oil, grease, butane bottles, and parts for farm equipment. It was thrilling, eerie, wonderful, and so right!

We went back to Hotel la Tour across the street. It was only 40 euros per night, but we were there in the "off season." We prepared to have dinner with Jean and Yvette in the quaint dining room downstairs. We ate succulent duck, and delicious hot bread and fresh

vegetables, opened several bottles of regional wines, and visited. Lindy got a workout on her interpreting, but was so gracious. Jean Monlezun had eyebrows like my grandfather and would move them in the same way. We talked of WW II and how we had each lost family. Jean said that he was grateful to the Americans for helping France. His father and he had helped the resistance during the war. He said that only a large country like America could be the ones to go to Iraq and oust Hussein. He was grateful, but had a sad look. Yvette kept us laughing. She never knew her father, and so was happy to help *us* find our ancestry.

Even one year after this meeting, Yvette sent me documents concerning my great-great-grandparents, Dominique Barthelemy and Marie Mailhe. Enclosed was a wedding picture taken in 1894 of their granddaughter, Felecite, and there, next to her, was Grandpa Dominique's brother, Antoine and his wife! Now I know *why* my grandfather, Antoine, was given that name. Yvette Monlezun had found more close direct descendents in Lalanne who wanted us to have these documents that linked us. The tapestry of history continued to be woven with the written word. We gave a final toast to the importance of family, and then, Jean raised his glass and said, "To peace among all nations". Yvette said that we must come back on the first anniversary of our visit. I told them to come visit America and "beaucoup Monlezuns".

The next morning, I flung open the windows and shutters and there were the Sun drenched, snow capped Pyreenes mountains. It was a magnificent sight to behold. It had been overcast the day before, so we had no idea that the entire area was bordered on the south with this view! No wonder Dominique said that his home in France was beautiful. I took pictures of the peaks as a backdrop for the "*Monlezun et fils*" building, butane bottles (again), babies, flowers, and a short-of-stature elderly gentleman with a cane, wearing a beret, with Vic standing next to him. I told him, in my feeble French, that my great-grandfather was from Lalanne, as I pointed westward. He said in French, "Oh, you will need a car or bicycle to get there!"

I bought a book about the history of the area, called *Histoire du Conton de Trie*. (Nine cantons make a commune, and 1720 communes make a department). Lalanne was decreed a village in 1465, and the town of Trie, 2 miles away, was the governmental seat. In fact, some maps list *Lalanne* as *Lalanne-Trie*. Trie's history dates to the year 300. The original Roman Tower is still there, next to the Monlezun and Son business. The "Hotel laTour" is connected to that archway and tower. Many Monlezuns, Navarres, Nagaro, and Mailhes sat on the council seats of both Lalanne and Trie. These are the names of families that married Monlezuns. The map names Lalanne as Lalanne-Tris. "Baise" is the name of the river that runs through the area. Therefore, *Trie-sur-Baise* is the "town of Trie that in on the River Baise".

Grandpa Dominique told his 5 children that he came from a town with a beautiful river, with mountains on one side. That is why he was drawn to property at Cypress Point, along the Mermentau River. The town of Lake Arthur would not be incorporated for another 28 years after his arrival. There is a small island near the mouth of Grand Lake, down river, that is called Monlezun Island, because Grandpa Dominique was one of the first settlers to fish off of its banks.

We headed to a hardware store to shop, Vic's idea of shopping at its best. We bought a knife and seeds. I picked flowers from the profusion of wild flowers that surrounded the grounds. They are dried now, and kept in my home.

We headed north to Monlezun, France. The tall poplar trees lined much of the narrow highway, like stately soldiers, showing us the way. There were white ducks in many of the yards, silos, stacks of hay, stone homes with red tile roofs, and sheep. This region is known for its pate and a dish called Cassoulet, which is duck and white beans. About 45 minutes later, there was the sign, "Monlezun". The road turned and winded up the hill to the village. At the promontory of the hill was the church, cemetery and mayor's house. There was no one outside.

We walked into the cemetery. Ancient iron crosses were everywhere, each a work of art. There was one Monlezun there. Other names were Lafargue, Laborde, Lafort, Abadie, Nogaro, and Mailhe. On the north side of the church, the land has been eroded away and the gravesites are scattered. We found small bone fragments everywhere. I took many of them, and buried them, humming a Latin hymn of my youth, that was sung at the incensing of the body during a Catholic funeral called "In Paradisum". The village of Monlezun is said to be from the year 300. How many people were buried here over the millennium? Storms took their toll on this hillside as the ancient graves on the north side were displaced. There were old cedar trees. How I wish they could have spoken. The church was locked. I sat on a large stone by the doorway, wishing we could go inside. Two months later, my niece, Anna Monlezun Thibodeaux, said that the mayor let her in the church by getting the ancient, large iron key that was hidden *under that very stone!* Jason, her husband, sang the "Our Father" in French in the church. He couldn't resist the prayerful moment...and the acoustics!

Anna and Jason asked the Mayor of Monlezun about the meaning of the word *Monlezun*. He said that it came from 2 words "Mont" for mountain and "lezun" which means the glow of the light from behind the mountain. What a beautiful word indeed! So, generations ago, the spelling of our name might have been Montlezun. There is a crest with this name in a French book of family crests. It has three roosters on it. The name of Montlezun is listed in the white pages of France.

We went around the winding road to the ruins of "Chateau Monlezun", from the year 900. Just one wall is left, and it sits overlooking green rolling meadows of cows and horses. Japanese Plum trees, a favorite of my dad's, were in the yard of the ancient home next door. The snow-capped peaks of the Pyrenees to the south were visible. You could see the next village to the west. Farms encircled the village, and were laid out with precision. I heard the "Pastoral Symphony" from Handel's Messiah in my head. My dad, who sang in the Messiah for many years with my mom, was happy I was there. I could feel it.

We left the village of Monlezun and headed east to continue our trip, following the Pyrenees southeast to the Mediterranean Sea ending at the Spanish border. I was

emotionally spent that day, but so happy and grateful for the opportunity given to Vic and me to visit these honored places and meet family. To think that a few short weeks ago, I knew nothing of Dominique and Louisa's home or even the names of my ancestors. It all came together like a grand play and we were writing it as it was laid out for us. Our prayers were answered and beyond.

I went for all all of us ..... all of the almost 400 descendants of Dominique and Louisa. I followed the Pyrenees *mer a mer* (sea to sea) and found the graves of my ancestors. I come back with the desire to make sure we can reunite at the American gravesites of Dominique and his children. Banners, to honor their memory and their commitment to make a better life for their children and their children's children, will mark the graves. My brother, Charles Monlezun, wrote his expression of gratitude. To our Patriarch, we express our gratitude that he dared to dream of a light which might exist just over the mountains of his youth. He brought to America the willingness of his dreams and courage, his faith and fortitude. We are not only the repositories of that willingness, but the next generation charged with the responsibility to search out the light over our own mountains.

Well Grandpa Dominique and Grandma Louisa, the family *is* grateful. And so we will gather...and remember."