



The Story of La Cigale

La Cigale was started by hosting foreign exchange students. Over time, we became exchange families.

La Cigale, a small family sewing shop in Mt. Gretna, PA consists of our nephew, Tom, Nancy, and me, John. And, we have close ties to small family sewing shops in Provence, France. *Together* we bring you the tradition of Provençal Table Art.

Voila! From Provence to You, by La Cigale!

Provençal Table Art fashioned to bring the vibrant and festive colors of Provence to your table and pleasure to the eye. Created by Roger and his family using tissues of both traditional and contemporary color and design, unique to the South of France. Made in Provence, southern France, these are truly Provençal products.



(Pictured left: Tom and John enjoying a picnic at the foot of Mt. St. Victoire near Aix-en-Provence!)

And now, for the rest of the story...

In the early 90's, we started hosting exchange students. We hosted six in all- four French, two German. These were one-year students and this was truly an exchange. From these exchange

students came exchange families, and from the exchange families, La Cigale was created.

The idea to import and sell Provençal Tablecloths was Jackey's, Oliver's mom. Whenever she or anyone else would come to visit from France, they would be asked to bring Provençal tablecloths. On one visit, Jackey said, "John, when you leave the tire business you will sell Provençal Nap [Tablecloths]." And, I said, "Yeah right." Well, here we are!

(Pictured Right: Roger and Katia at the shop.)

Jackey gives us our name

In August 1995, Jackey is visiting us in Mt Gretna. Mt Gretna is a small artsy village located in south east Pennsylvania surrounded by forested hills, PA Game Lands and Conservancy, and no additional development. Mt. Gretna has a covered open-air theater and tabernacle, where music and theater are offered during the summer. We were walking with Jackey towards the theater when Jackey said, "They are singing!" I listened; no music from the theater. I don't hear any porch parties (these are common in Mt. Gretna in warm months); all I hear are bugs - cicadas - the standard noise of late summer. *Am I missing something?*



So I ask Jackey, "Who is singing?" She says, "They are singing." My response is, "Who are they, Jackey?" "They are the cigale; that is who is singing. In English, the cicada-the bugs. That's who is singing. You see, we have more in common than you think. If we ever do this adventure with the nap, this is the name: La Cigale." And, I listened to Jackey and the bugs. Yes, they *were* singing; and again, Jackey was right. There is more that we have in common than we realize.

In Southern France, the Cicada, "La Cigale," is a sign of good fortune. Its image can be found in jewelry, on pottery, on soap, and even in a tablecloth design.

Bridget brings our logo

January 1998: Bridget and Jon Jack are visiting Angel, their daughter who is an exchange student in upstate New York. Midday Friday we receive a call from them that they are in PA and is it OK that they visit with us. Our response is, "How soon will you arrive and how long can we keep you?" Bridget is from Corsica and now lives in St. Remy- de -Provence, France. She is an aunt to one of the students.

For supper that night we had already planned to have "Corse Chicken," a chicken recipe we picked up in Corsica, and to have friends over who know Bridget and Jon Jack. After a wonderful Corsican meal, Bridget presented us with a gift: a picture she



had done of a Cigale [Cicada] and, of course, the tablecloths that they brought. Bridget had been talking with Jackey and knew of the business idea. Jackey has family in St. Remy and is related to Bridget.

Spring 1999: We close the tire business

Dunlop is merging with Goodyear... National Tire & Battery [Sears group] are undercutting us by \$5.00 per unit... Pep Boys is doing 4 for \$99.00... and one of our suppliers just stole one of our main accounts. We have been in the tire business for over 30 years. Gary the CPA says, "Time for a change." We close the tire shop and go to Europe to visit with all the exchange families.



(Pictured Left: John and the family in Provence.)

While staying with Oliver's family in Aix en Provence, Jackey says, "John, pay attention. It is now time to do the business of nap [tablecloths]." My response is that I know nothing about tablecloths. Nancy says, "Let's think about it, talk about it, and ask the rest [the other exchange families] what they think; Jackey might be right."

Now, no one in any of the exchange families had anything to do with the business of tablecloths, but when they thought about it, they all had a friend or a cousin who either did or knew someone who did.

Inquiries were made, and soon it was like making a snowball, pushing it over the edge, and watching it start to roll down hill.

August 1999: Return home, work to be done

We arrive home and my head is spinning with ideas and all of the offers of help to make this crazy idea work. Again I'm hearing what Jackey said:

"John, don't dream your life... live your dreams."

We talk to CPA Gary and ask his advice on this matter. Much to my surprise, not only did he think that the business idea was good, but the name and how it came about was just fantastic. Now, Gary knows all the exchange students and all the family members who have visited, so, when I told him that it was Jackey who started this, he understood.

Now it is Gary's turn. We need all the legal and business stuff that needs to be done to create not only a new business, but one that imports. Gary liked the name so much that he put us in touch with a patent/trademark attorney, John Mitchell. We now go through all the hoops and, voila! We have the Circle R behind our name! What a process! We are now receiving correspondence from France where the families have all sorts of contacts lined up when I come.

October 1999: off to France

We talked with all of the families and it was agreed upon that October was a good time and that they would arrange the meetings with the various sewing shops and suppliers. Upon my arrival, I realized that I was a fish out of water. Many of the people I was to meet spoke little or no English. And, I would have failed the test for French Culture 101. But, I had my shepherds Jackey and Jany and with all the rest of the family. I got on OK, *sort of*..

Of all the sewing shops we visited, we picked two to buy from; actually they picked us to sell to, another dumb American looking to make a fortune on French stuff (*well not quite*, remember our French family).

The first shop was in Marseille. Their collections were nice, but the quality was not there and Jackey did not trust the owner - she was right. No titles attached, this was a sweat-shop, with poor quality.

The second shop, in Avignon was really nice, good quality, very nice collections, but the shop manager had an attitude and the owner we have yet to meet. We buy small quantities from both.

Now back to the states; let's see if we can sell this stuff.

April 2000: Back to France

I have returned to France, but not just for business. Oliver is in dental school and Jon-Marie, his uncle, is a Dentist, and I need some work done. They have invited me to be their patient. While here, we will also look into some of the shops that we have been referred to. Jon-Marie, Jon-Pierre, and Jon-Jack all have done much leg work. We have many new contacts to visit, in particular one Armenian named George.

Late in the trip I am introduced to George by way of a friend of Jon-Marie. George is right out of a good mystery novel: he's big, round-faced, with black hair, a big mustache, and gruff-voice. But, if you ask for his shirt you'd have it. He is a market vendor of tablecloths, has been for years. He does several markets in several villages in Provence. (I forgot the most important thing: he knows everyone!)

George agrees to be my chief shepherd, but I still need one of my other shepherds as George knows no English and George is George. We are still dealing with the original two sewing shops. I now, like Jackey, do not like the owner of the one in Marseilles, and we have yet to meet the owner of the one in Avignon whose manager still has an attitude. We have seen many but have yet to find the right sewing shop. George says I must come again, but the next time, he would like to know in advance so he can spend more time taking me to shops he knows. We agree and I return home.

April 2001: Grandma goes to France!

I am in France with Grandma and Grandpa with Sis as my helper. They wished to see the boys [the exchange students]. Grandma is 90 and has just had a pacemaker installed. Grandpa is 84 and suffering respiratory ailments. But they wished to go- and guess who is tapped to take them? OK, on with the story...

All the French families are impressed that these older Americans, who have in their lives traveled very little, have no language skills [the Grands are retired PA Dutch farmers], know little about other cultures or their histories, and are not adventurous with food, would make the trip to France to visit with them. But, more importantly, was their wish to visit their sons.

The reception that the Grands received was that of an honored family member, and they responded by not turning up their noses at any of the culinary delights put before them (*and there were many*). I have never feasted on such delights, before or

after. They (the Grands) showed a true interest in both the Provençal and French culture and history, and by doing so, were received warmly by all that they came in contact with.

They in two weeks did more to promote a positive example of an American than most career diplomats do in their lifetime. The French families still reminisce about "The French Adventure of Grandma and Grandpa."

Leaving the Grands visiting with Jany's mom in Avignon, Sis, Jany and I go to meet with the Avignon sewing shop owner, Madame ? for lunch, and then go on to the sewing shop. We are to meet at the train station in Avignon. We are early. We are standing by Jany's car talking. I am facing Sis and Jany and I stop talking; I guess it was the look on my face. Both Jany and Sis turned to see what I was looking at, and there she was: the Madame. The skirt she was wearing was short and painted on, and the rest... she stopped everything and there were many sprained necks. Sis agreed with Jany concerning the Madame, "She looks like trouble." I found her very pleasant!

The lunch was great! And, the scenery, well, use your imagination. At the sewing shop, she is very easy to deal with, unlike Monsieur Attitude. But, Jany and Sis are watching her like birds of prey would watch for their next kill. On the way home to Mamies, they were both very vocal as to why doing business with the Madame and Monsieur Attitude were not in our best interest.

Before leaving France, it was decided that I would return. We would pursue more of the contacts which have been given to us, and we would be in contact with George; maybe he could open the right door. We did not tell George that I would be in France because this trip was for the Grands, not intended as a business trip for me, so little business was done, and for the Grands, well it was the adventure of a lifetime.

June 2001: Tom joins us and I am off to France to find tissue (material)

Our nephew Tom has been downsized so he asks if he can help us. [Tom comes from the world of large computer companies]. We say yes. We are thinking that Tom can build us a web site, as we do not have the money to have it done. Tom comes through: our original website was his creation.

We now have another phase to this business. We have signed a contract on a building in downtown Mt. Gretna [tongue in cheek]. Mt. Gretna is a destination, but there is little available in the way of shopping. There is music, theatre, a dinner theatre, mini golf, restaurants and a lake, but not much in the way of shopping. This building was in bad shape; it needs removed and rebuilt, but not while the summer season is on. Nancy comes up with this idea to attract attention to La Cigale and to promote art in Mt. Gretna. Mt. Gretna has a very large juried art show every August.

A big event. Her idea is to wrap the existing building in Provençal Tablecloth fabric. Sounded good to me.

Now how does one wrap a building? I enlisted the help of Ted [Ted is a professional photographer specializing in agriculture]. Ted and I measure the entire building, then break the building into sections. Then we figure how many square inches of material it will take to cover it - a lot! Now, it is off to France.

I have been in contact with everyone, including George, and all are anxious for my visit, even George. I go with Jany, Jackey and George to several shops, but none can be agreed upon as a supplier. While with George, we visit many interesting large shops, most of which from a business stand-point were out of our league. Remember, we are a startup, a small and unknown quantity; these people are looking for large businesses and lengthy commitments, not a new start up with no background, no money, no history - and American to boot!

George says come back in the fall. I say to Jany and Jackey we need to find a shop now. Not only do we need a supplier because no one likes or trusts the one in Marseilles, but Jany and Sis both have not-so-good feelings about the one in Avignon, and we need tissue to cover the building. As the word is out back home about what we are up to, we must get it done.

Everyone is flustered. We have one week minus the weekend - *not much time!* Jany's godmother comes through: she tells us of a small family shop not far from Mamie's home. Jany makes a call and we meet with Roger; he will supply the tissue [material] we need to cover the building. [Roger and his family think we are nuts.] Jany picks the tissue, it ships the same day, and will probably arrive before me. One down, one to go.

Will his shop sew for us knowing what we are, also what we are not? The answer is "Yes," based not so much on me but on Jany's godmother and her family. To this day every one from either the French or American families who has met with Roger and his family likes them, their collections, and their quality. They are easy to deal with, no sweat-shop, all family, and bad attitudes are not allowed.

We have been doing business with this shop and only this shop since we opened in 2001. Our families have become as the exchange families - very close.

Time to go home...

July 2001: Cover the building

The job of covering this building was more than I or any of us bargained for. Then, from Indiana comes Ringwald: what a surprise, what a blessing. Tom has talent to do what should not or can not be done. Tom calls Bev, who also comes in from Indiana. Bev is a frustrated designer. Tom, Ted, John W., Tom W., Ian, Nancy, Sis, Dean, Bev, any one who is fool enough to volunteer start on the "cover the building art project."



Guess what? We got done before the art show? The villagers either think it's great or that we are escapees from over the hill [there is a mental hospital over the hill]. We think it looks great. Our first shipment from the sewing shop has arrived. We have a few accounts from our test marketing and there are a couple that wish to talk to us when we get a continuous source of supply.

We are off to set the world on fire!

