

FRANCE. CONSERVATOIRE NATIONAL DU MACHINISME ET DES PRATIQUES AGRICOLES.
(C.N.M.P.A.)

For about fifteen years now, old farming implements and machinery have been in France, as elsewhere, a matter of fast increasing interest in the public at large. Since 1970 or so, the number of so-called "thrashing festivals" ("fêtes des battages") has grown to the point of reaching several hundreds each summer throughout the whole country, although no one is in a position to assess this number more precisely. Many of these festivals have remained purely folkloristic in character. Others have become sheer commercial enterprises, aimed primarily at making money with the tourists thronging the countryside in July and August. But some of them have been from the very beginning in the hands of non-profit associations. And year after year, these associations have been increasingly drawn into the business of collecting, safeguarding, and getting relevant information on a growing body of items, thus becoming, with or without the name, "museums". At the same time, a number of other collections were being set up along more traditional lines, at the initiative of local museums, of private collectors, etc. The result today is an unknown number - in the order of two or three hundreds perhaps - of agricultural "museums" of every description, most of them known only to very few people or inside a very small area.

The Conservatoire was born in the same way. The idea of a National Museum of Agricultural Machinery was first launched by the French union of dealers in agricultural machinery (SEDIMA, for "Syndicat des Entreprises de Diffusion du Machinisme Agricole") in 1977. During a few years, the SEDIMA organized mainly exhibitions of ancient machinery, both true-scale and models, with the support of Antenne 2, one of the national television networks. These exhibitions, by attracting an often unexpectedly large public attendance, established beyond any doubt that the times were ripe for the project. But the problem of continuity remained to be solved. The SEDIMA decided to give away its collection to the town, or towns, where local authorities would present the best project for a museum of agricultural machinery. In 1981, the choice was made, in favour of Chartres and of Niort. But implementing the projects shortly ran into difficulties, both at Chartres and as a consequence of growing misunderstandings between the teams of Chartres and of Niort. A national structure had to be devised to overcome these obstacles. The second half of 1982 was mainly devoted to the setting up of this national structure, which was at last definitely created in March, 1983. That was not the end of it, however, since money had yet to come in in order that this structure could be set working. Owing to the usual bureaucratic sluggishness, money came in only toward the end of 1983, allowing the real work of collecting machines, of transporting them to their proper location, etc., to begin in January, 1984.

What happened in the meantime in Chartres and Niort respectively ?

The project of Chartres was completely overhauled, including the composition of the local staff. As it stands now, the project is to buy and renew a disused shed for repairing steam locomotives, well located in the immediate vicinity of the city centre. Pending its completion, the team is lodged

in the form of an agricultural college at Sours, a village 8 km far from downtown Chartres.

In Niort on the contrary, the completion of the project has gone more or less on schedule. Provisionally, the large size machinery has been sheltered in the hangar of a small airport at the gates of the town. The Conservatoire itself will stand on the service area of Aiffres-Vouillé on the western side of Autoroute A 7 Paris-Bordeaux, 7 km from Niort, among a number of other buildings including a restaurant, a "shop-window" for regional products, the offices of the regional "Chambre d'Agriculture", etc. Completion of the building is expected for the summer of 1984. A first exhibition could be set up, one year ahead of schedule, inside rooms left temporarily vacant in another building; the themes were viticulture, the beginnings of agricultural mechanization (based on small-scale models from the 18th and 19th centuries), grain cleaning and sorting machinery (an industry of local importance), and toys depicting modern machinery.

It is still too early to attempt to give a more detailed idea of what the Conservatoire will be, and especially of what its two branches in Niort and Chartres will really look like. The conclusion for now is that after nearly two years of uncertainty, the whole project is rolling off again. Further difficulties cannot be excluded. But an organization capable of solving them is now working, and this is perhaps the main thing.

Paris, March 1984

F. Sigaut

Administrative Organization of the CNMPA

The Conservatoire National du Machinisme et des Pratiques Agricoles is now an Association (under the French law of 1901 governing associations). Its board includes the following persons:

- M. Pierre Stévignon, President, representative of the SEDIMA
- M. André Boutteaud, Vice-president, representative of Niort
- M. Jean Lecocq, Vice-president, representative of Chartres
- Mme Christine Kovacshazy, Secretary, representative of the Ministry of Agriculture
- M. André Desvallées, Treasurer, representative of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs
- two delegates of other ministries,
- a delegate of the television network "Antenne 2"
- M.F. Sigaut, representative of the scientific community.

The National Association CNMPA has responsibility for the programme, and especially for ensuring the necessary coordination between Chartres and Niort. But there are both in Chartres and in Niort local Associations, responsible for the implementation of the programme at the local level. These local associations are presided by MM. Boutteaud and Lecocq, respectively.

Location and contacts

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