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**POSTCARD**

# Learning of language and a fire

By William Kriegel

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When I moved from France to the United States 20 years ago, I barely spoke English. I learned the hard way — by being thrown into it.

To make myself understood, I adhered to three basic practices: When conjugating a verb, use the present tense; never lose your momentum when speaking, and if you don't know a word in English, substitute a French word. It was difficult for people to understand me, but I appreciated their patience.

Of course, I often travel to far-off places where English isn't spoken. One of the first long motorcycle trips I ever took was a four-month tour of the Red Sea region that started in France and ended in Egypt, and took my brother, Hubert, and me through Turkey, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia,

After we had ridden for days in the Saudi desert without seeing a soul, a Bedouin appeared out of nowhere, walking alone in the sand under a very hot sun in his djellaba, the traditional robe worn in Arab countries.

Using gestures, he invited us to have tea, and from under his djellaba produced tea leaves, cups and a pot. Somehow, we gathered enough brush to make a small fire and brew the tea. After we finished, my brother and I re-

sumed our trip and the nomad disappeared in to the desert.

Once, I gave a dinner speech to 1,200 Chinese en-

ergy specialists at a conference in Beijing. I would speak a sentence in English, the Chinese interpreter would translate it, and so on. All of a sudden, without realizing it, I reverted to French. The translator looked at me as if I had three heads. I didn't notice anything until a colleague shouted out to me that I was no longer speaking English.

Every summer a group of six friends from France and I take a 10-day motorcycle trip in the Rockies, packing only a few clothes and our maps. We sleep either at motels we happen to pass or under the stars.

One year, I was in the middle of a business deal and told my fellow bikers I would have to keep in contact with my New York office.

through Wyoming, Idaho and Oregon, ending up in Washington. Cell-phone reception in the Rockies is often nonexistent, so every 90 minutes or so we stopped at a gas station so that I could check in with New York.

The French troupe went to one side of the gas station and philosophized, or as we say in France, "reinvented the world," while I sat on the pavement in my leather jacket on the other side, at the end of a pay phone. My friends were annoyed to have to spend so much time at these dusty gas stations, but they had been forewarned. I'll never forget stopping at the last gas station on the eastern access road to Yellowstone where, after a two-and-a-half-hour conference call connecting the West Coast, the East Coast and Europe, my colleagues and I nailed down the most significant deal of my life.

What made it all the more fantastic was that no one other than my fellow bikers knew my exact location.

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