

STORY OF MARIE TOUYA (1877-1976)

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Text from Marie-Claude Heydemann (mc.heydemann@gmail.com), great-grand niece of Marie Touya based on texts and research cited in references, especially the enormous work of Joan Lounibos whose great-grand father was a neighbor of Marie and Louis Lamotte.

A young woman from Bearn without problems ?

Marie is born on April 24th 1877 in Méracq, a small town from Bearn (Pyrénées-Atlantiques, France) in a modest family, who lives in the house “ La petite “. Jean Touya, her father, is called Lapet. He and his wife, Jean Catherine Lacoste, already have had three kids, but Marie’s sister, born in 1871, also named Marie, is the only one alive, her brother Jean-Baptiste is born two years later, in 1879.

It took next to nothing to reduce the memory of Mary to her born certificate. In 2019, when I am working on my Touya ancestor’s genealogy, I do not find any document about her. No trace of marriage or death, neither in the archives of the commune of Méracq nor in the departmental ones nor on the genealogic research websites French or foreign. No family member seems to have gone further than Paris. So what did she become? A distant emigration seems unlikely.

But in fact yes ! Pictures inherit from her sister’s daughter, my grand mother, and three postcards found in Méracq by Jacques Laborde, grand son of her brother, will bring us on the trace of her emigration to San Franciscoⁱ. To tell her story, related below, a group of persons in France and in California are bringing their efforts together. The help of AME has been crucial. But there remain mysteries that we would like to solve.

The life of Marie Touya, wife of Lamotte in San Francisco

Marie emigrates in the United states alone at the age of sixteen. She arrives in New York on October 1893, on the boat “La Bretagne” coming from Le Havre and aiming to San Francisco, its final destination. Has she left to avoid her older sister’s fate: maid in Pau, had a new born baby on November 15th, 1893, recognized three months later by the father whom she marries on March 6th 1895? We still know nothing about Marie’s motivation, her trip from Méracq to Le Havre, her arrival in San Francisco.

We now have her working, as many people from Bearn¹, in a French laundry in San Francisco. Working conditions in those renowned laundries are very hard and well described in bibliographic references^{ii iii}.

1 Another Marie Touya, without any known link with the one of this article, born in Morlanne in 1872, is in 1900 an ironer in a laundry from San Francisco, and died there in 1902.

On October 5th, 1895, she marries, in San Francisco, Louis Lamotte, who is six years older than her, also a laundry worker. Marie is now called Marie Lamotte, and her patronymic is then forgotten in The United states for the rest of her life.

Louis Lamotte emigrates from Belgium with his parents in 1881, he is a unique child. In 1890 he works as an ironer in his mother's laundry. But he appears to have a business sense. In 1894 and 1898 he buys land in El Verano, a town located about sixty kilometers north of San Francisco, near Sonoma. He is very active, and his name is mentioned several times in the local press. He co-organizes big annual picnics for the laundry's workers. He helps create the first French laundries union in San Francisco, becomes its first president in 1901 and remains in this position for at least two years. In November 1901, to thank him for all he has done, the union offers him a gold engraved watch. In December 1902, Marie is a member of the executive committee of the union.

Life in El Verano

While the life of Marie and Louis appears therefore full of success within the union and laundry life, they move around 1905² to El Verano where Louis has bought land. It is a tourist destination valued by holidaymakers, famous for fishing and hunting, near hot springs in the "Valley of the Moon".

Together Louis and Marie manage one of the many hotels of the county, the "Villa El Verano", a resort which then belongs to the new husband of Louis's mother. Indeed, in 1888, Louis's mother gets a divorce for "mental cruelty" of her first husband and remarries in 1892 with Alfred Nauvremont (1847-1936). Like her and the Lamotte family, he is born in Herbeumont (province of Luxembourg in Belgium) and emigrated to San Francisco around 1874, followed by a numerous brotherhood, from which he is the oldest. The Villa El Verano is bought by the Névraumont family around 1900. In February 1910, Alfred Névraumont (who has no child) and his wife gives seventeen lots to Louis. In the April census Louis is declared owner of the hotel while his mother and stepfather Alfred are declared non workers.

The Villa El Verano comprises several buildings improved, as well as their environment, by the family Lamotte-Névraumont. Publicity for the hotel appears in local news papers, which always evoke in a laudatory manner its ball room, considered as the best in the region, and its dance and show evenings.

Marie seems happy when she writes to her family the three postcards found by her grand nephew Jacques. Their texts are today the only direct testimonies we have about her life. They show that she writes a lot and sends money to her family. She manages the correspondence of the hotel, the orderings of the postcards showing different views from the Villa El Verano (some twenty can be found on the internet) and probably has many more activities in this establishment which has about thirty rooms in the main building and other annexes.

Festivities organized in July 1911 by the Villa El Verano to commemorate the Bastille day are related in the press, which emphasizes the original idea of Marie who arranges for a rain of confettis blue, white

2 Thus before the terrible catastrophe which affects San Francisco in 1906, with an earth quake and many fires.

and red from the roof of the building, propelled by ventilators and which she calls “a french-american tempest”³.

The presence of Marie Lamotte in San Francisco, without her husband since he is not mentioned, is also signaled in the press. In particular, in December 1910, she attends the exceptional outdoor concert given for Christmas eve by Louisa Tetrazzi the most famous diva of her time, a soprano with remarkable vocalizations.

On his side, Louis, whose financial situation seems flourishing, attends men clubs, participates to their banquets and makes relations with men who have important positions in politic or justice in the Sonoma county.

Annulment of Marie Touya’s marriage

Marie’s life seems to be a beautiful success, when it suddenly turns into a nightmare. She has no child. In France she loses her close family: her mother dies in 1901; her sister is interned in Pau hospital two months later, and dies in 1918; her brother started a family in 1905, but in 1909 his health deteriorates; her father dies in 1917 ... Does she then suffer from depression? In the 1920 census she is counted as interned in the Napa psychiatric hospital and she is put under guardianship in 1920. The hospital refuses today to give us information about her file.

Louis asks for the annulment of their marriage. A judge gives the agreement on December 28th, 1923, based on the fact that Marie is declared mad since the date of their wedding, which is 28 years earlier ! How could Louis, such an advised man in his affairs and relations, have married a mad woman ? How could he treat in such a way his wife who obviously helped him a lot in his social ascent? Nothing makes it possible for us to know either who could have testified against Marie, or why her tutor didn’t defend her.

Louis immediately sells the Villa El Verano in February 1924. He remarries with Rita Gonella, who is twenty-two years younger than him. Married a first time in 1915 in San Francisco, divorced in 1919, she is registered in 1920 on the electoral lists in El Verano. Louis and Rita will live in Francisco from real estate commerce. Louis dies there in 1939 without descendant.

Mysterious end of life

Around 1940, Marie gets out of the Napa hospital together with other women interned like her. Those people were generally placed with private individuals or with associations. At that point we lose track of Marie.

We find her back around 1970, in Cloverdale in the *Manzanita Manor*, kind of family pension, where she will end her life, apparently peacefully. Articles of local newspapers mention Marie taking part in activities.

In February 1876, she dies at almost 99. For an unknown reason an autopsy is performed; it reveals that she had blue eyes and an atrophied uterus. She is buried in the cemetery for the indigent, where her

³ The three colors are indeed common to the flags of both countries. Moreover, the celebration occurs between the anniversary of the independence of the United States and July 14th.

anonymous grave would have remained unknown without the intervention of Sandra Frary^{iv} historian and archivist in Santa Rosa (Sonoma county headquarters, California), who later writes a text about Marie and posts it in the cemetery (iv).

This is how we can write today the sad story of Marie Touya who left her peaceful town in Bearn when she was adolescent to emigrate in California, where she experimented highs and lows, without ever seeing again neither her family nor her native country.

To try to go further with Marie Touya

The French American team, fascinated by this story, would like to dissipate shadow zones of Marie's life and is looking for information, documents, photographs, family references or testimonies in the following areas :

- Recruitment process of the emigrants from Bearn, in particular in North America in the last quarter of the nineteenth century,
- Journey conditions between Pau and Le Havre
- Crossing of the Atlantic between Le Havre and New York
- Journeys in train between New-York and San Francisco
- Other emigrants from Bearn who worked in laundries in or around San Francisco

Indeed, if some family or friendship links with Marie Touya exist in your family our team would be delighted to hear about it.

With all our thanks to readers who could contribute to this work

i Marie-Claude Heydemann, photo taken in San Francisco, *Généalogie des Pyrénées-Atlantiques* (Revue de l'association CGPA), N° 121, July 2020, pages 12-15.

ii Joan Lounibos, *Marie Touya de Méracq*, website AME (2020).

[https : sites.google.com/view/assomememig/emigration/marie-touya-of-meracq](https://sites.google.com/view/assomememig/emigration/marie-touya-of-meracq)

iii Olivier Lafaye, *Les Béarnais à San Francisco*, Cairn, (2019).

iv Sandra Frary, *Mrs. Marie Touya Lamotte*, text published in the cemetery, where he is buried Santa Rosa, county of Sonoma, California (2020).