PIONEER EXPERIENCES

EVENTUALLY the trail to the pioneer's cabin became familiar, for it was in long use before a wagon road was opened up. In the meantime all the possessions and supplies of these backwoods pioneers were carried in on foot. First came their emigrant chests, laboriously lugged for many miles over windfalls and broken ground. Then came their women and children. A few who were able bought stoves, which likewise were carried in, but most of them cooked over an open fireplace.

Felix Englebert, who was seventeen years old when he came to Door County with his parents, says that it was late in November (1856) before they were able to get a scout to find their land for them. A foot of snow had fallen. For thirty miles the father led his little flock through snow and slush. A shack in the form of an inverted V was built of brush and served as their home for a while. The cooking was done over an open fire, and water was obtained from a hole dug in a nearby swamp. When they needed bread, they went ten miles to get it baked.

Other settlers came from Green Bay in rowboats and sailing vessels. One large company who were bound for the town of Gardner took passage on a small steamer which had just started to navigate the waters of the bay. A mile or two before they reached their destination, Sugar Creek,
the steamer was stranded on a reef close to the shore. This company had a large supply of potatoes with them for their winter supplies and for seed. Melvin Haines whose father had settled near there the year before tells of the Belgians toting potatoes on their backs up through the woods for weeks.

The brush shelters were no protection against the fall rains. Moreover there were many bear, wolves and other savage animals about, and many a choice piece of salt pork was filched before the settlers learned how to protect themselves against these forest thieves. It was therefore necessary to build log houses.

It was close to Christmas time before all the settlers had built their little loghouses, roofed over, some with shingles and some with cedar bark. There were in most cases no nails or other hardware in the construction of these houses. The floor (when there was one) consisted of split logs, the chairs were benches of split blocks, the beds (most often two two-storied) consisted of balsam twigs and leaves, and the trunks served as tables. The whip-saw was necessary to rip a log into planks for a door, but hinges were often made of leather strips or, still better, of knots and crotches of limbs. Last to be built was the fireplace and huge chimney built of field-stones, laboriously carried together from far and near and laid up with clay. When this was done and the first pan of salt pork was fried over the fireplace within the house, they felt that they had a home indeed.

Now came the most important work of all, and that was the clearing of land. Around them stood the dense woods with huge trunks. There was no market for logs at that time, and they had to be rolled together and burned
up. It was a terrible, backbreaking job to pry those huge logs together, many of them three and four feet in diameter, and they were slow to burn, green as they were. But almost continuously through the winter the piles of brush and logs were smoking and blazing.

By spring every Belgian settler had a little clearing around his cabin, studded with stumps. But now the settlers' few dollars were all gone and it was necessary for nearly all to leave home and earn some money. So they left their wooden shoes behind them and departed for Green Bay, Oconto, Marinette, Milwaukee and Chicago. Before going they had bought, begged or borrowed a little wheat for seed from the people of Bay Settlement. A harrow was made with wooden pins sloping backward, so they would slide over the roots and snags. These harrows were dragged back and forth by the women and children until the seed was well covered, and soon the clearings were covered with the green growth of the wheat.

And now for many weeks and months at a time, the women and children were left alone in the little loghouses scattered through the woods. The loneliness of those days and especially nights was never forgotten by the women, who, startled at every sound, imagined themselves attacked by Indians and wild beasts. Trembling behind barricaded doors they heard strange noises around the cabin and sometimes, peering through the window, they could see a skulking wolf or inquisitive bear. During these spring and summer months there was also great scarcity of food in the settlement. Many families did not taste bread for weeks, there was no milk or butter, and the diet consisted largely of fish, wild onions, roots and berries.

But at long intervals there was great rejoicing in the
little cabins when the husband or father came to visit his little family. On foot he came walking from Milwaukee or some other distant point, a hundred or two hundred miles away. Nor did he come empty-handed but brought some food supplies, little kitchen utensils and a ribbon or two for the children. Perhaps the best gift, the report of which was carried over the whole settlement, was a lusty calf which Chrysostom Herlache carried on his back, kicking and struggling, for twenty-five miles from Bay Settlement. This calf was to become the ancestor of the Herlache herds.

In due time the wheat was harvested and threshed. Now came the problem of getting the wheat ground into flour. As the men were still away to work, this problem also devolved upon the women. The nearest places where wheat could be ground were Algoma and Bay Settlement, and no wagon road led to either place. It was therefore customary for a woman to take a bushel of wheat on her head and walk to the mill with it. To an American of today, it would be quite impossible to carry even a half bushel of wheat on his head for any considerable distance, but the Belgian pioneer women had strong necks, being accustomed to carry heavy burdens that way. Moreover, their mode of carrying the wheat permitted considerable freedom of motion, which was necessary for one walking on a rough forest trail. The wheat was put in a bag which was securely tied at the opening. Then the bag was turned upside down and one corner of the bag was pushed back into the other corner so that this formed a rough hood. This hood was placed over the head, while the other end of the bag was tied securely to the back by means of a rope under the arms. This left the hands free, and with this burden on her head and back, the woman trudged indomitably on for twenty or
thirty miles through the forest.

Not only were these trips to the mill very laborious but they were also dangerous. Seraphine Lampereur, the great-grand-mother of the present chairman of the town of Union, once took a bushel of wheat on her head and started off to Bay Settlement to get it ground. She took a substantial lunch with her, for it was a forty mile trip going and returning. Nothing happened on the way to the mill.

It was late the next morning before the wheat was ground, but finally she started homeward, happy in the thought of making bread for her children. It was getting dusk, and she was still many miles from home when she suddenly discovered that she was pursued by a flock of timber wolves. It was impossible to run with the heavy burden on her head, so she threw down her precious bag of flour and also her lunch, of which she had eaten but little, and, with a cry for help to the Holy Virgin, took to her heels. The wolves stopped to fight over the lunch and the bag, and she was able to reach the hut of a settler.

The endurance of these Belgian women is incredible. Mrs. Cornelius Massart of Rosiere heard that a new mill, driven by water, had been installed at Red River, some ten miles from her home. She took a bushel of wheat on her head and carried it to the mill, but unfortunately the mill was not yet in operation. About three or four miles from Sugar Creek was the home of Constant Delveaux, who was reported to have brought two mill stones from Belgium. Being in great need of bread for her children, Mrs. Massart continued northward along the shore to Sugar Creek, about thirteen miles, and then turned southeast on a trail that led to Delveaux. This journey of more than twenty-six
miles she made in one day carrying her bushel of wheat the whole way. She stopped there that night. The next morning her wheat was ground, four persons being required to turn the stones. Thereupon she took her bag of unsifted flour and returned to her home.

When her husband came home and heard of this, he determined that his wife was to have no more such trips. He searched for and found some suitable stones to make a mill, but when he tried to chisel them into the proper shape, he found that his skill as a stone cutter was unequal to the task. However, a neighbor, Louis Coisman, was able to make a good job, and soon this new mill was grind-
ing flour for the neighborhood to the great relief of the women. One of the stones of this old mill may still be seen immediately behind the new church at Rosiere.

In the fall of 1857 a severe financial crisis paralyzed most industries, and our Belgian pioneers were unable to get any outside work. They therefore gave renewed consideration to the possibilities at home. Around their homes stood big forest trees containing thousands of logs, but there seemed to be no market for them. Pine logs, the most valuable, were selling for $1.50 per thousand board feet on the shore, but the Belgians lacked horses or oxen to haul them out of the woods. But if the pine logs could not be gotten out whole with profit, they could be cut into shingles and carried to the waterside by hand. Pine shingles, eighteen inches long and one-half inch thick were worth $1.50 per thousand in Green Bay. Here was a chance to make a little money and all, young and old, became shingle makers. Father and mother sawed the trees and the bolts, the children split them and father shaved them and bound them in bundles. Then they were carried to the shore, sometimes on the back, but better still on two bars by two men. From time to time a schooner came and carried them to Green Bay, but it was necessary for the owner to get a small boat to carry them from the shore to the schooner. A day's wages did not amount to much, but by everlastingly keeping at it the Belgians made money with their shingles. In 1868 4,000,000 hand-made shingles were shipped out of Brussels. By this time most of the settlers had obtained a cow or two which were used both for hauling shingles and plowing.

While at work at home the Belgians all wore wooden shoes or sabots as they were called. When plowing, they
wore them without socks, for the sabots soon filled up with loose soil. Being warm and dry they were also worn in winter when logging or working around the sawmills. They then tacked on long canvas leggings which made cheap and serviceable footwear. The sabots of the women were cut lower than those of the men, and they were fastened on the foot with a strap above the instep. A few could even dance with them but that was exceptional. In those days there were many wooden-shoemakers, and they often produced very artistic sabots beautifully carved and colored.

Owing to the crowded quarters of their little log-houses and the incidental unsanitary conditions, the lack of variety in diet, and the absence of medical attention, there was in pioneer times a very high death rate, especially among the children. At first the dead were buried back in the woods, but when Father Daems, the first priest who came to visit them, heard of this, he severely censured this practice and admonished them that, according to the teachings of the Church, the dead should be buried in consecrated ground. Thereafter, for a long time, the dead were carried on a stretcher by four or six men to Bay Settlement, about twenty or thirty miles,—a sad and weary pilgrimage.

For many years the Belgians were ignored by the people of other parts of the county. No help was given them in their poverty and distress, and they received no assistance in building roads or schools or other benefits of a tax-supported government. Living by themselves in the deep woods and unable to talk with people from other parts of the county, they were looked upon as being of little or no account. Nor had they learned to exercise their right of suffrage.

But eventually this situation came to an end through
the energy of one of the early pioneers in *Aux Premiers Belges* by the name of Xavier Martin. As a member of the ten original families, he came to America in 1853, and stayed a few years in Philadelphia, where he learned the English language. He was a very intelligent and capable young man, and when he in 1857 visited his relatives in *Aux Premiers Belges*, he was persuaded to remain as a school teacher. After seeing the condescending indifference with which his countrymen were treated by the older American, Irish and French settlers in the town, he went around among the leading Belgian pioneers and explained to them the American system of local government. He told them that by going to the polls and voting Unitedly, they could take control of local affairs, seeing they were in the majority. This suggestion met with a welcome reception and a slate was drawn up. Mr. Martin was a modest man and did not ask for all the offices. But he was not too modest. He knew that to be chairman or supervisor of the town was a thankless job full of criticism. Nor was it any pleasure to be assessor or treasurer because both of these offices were concerned with the matter of taxes—then as now a sore subject. He therefore contented himself with claiming the offices of clerk, school superintendent and justice of the peace. The first of this was a matter of necessity because he was the only Belgian who could write English; the second he sought because he was a school teacher and interested in education; and the third he preferred because at that time it was the most dignified and profitable of local offices. The Belgians lived ten miles from the polling place, but on the appointed day the other office seekers, lounging at ease, sure of their laurels, were dum-founded to see an army of Belgians approach, 230 strong,
marching in double file, each clutching a ticket especially
printed for them. Needless to say that every Belgian on
that ticket (and there were none but Belgians) was elected.

After that for several years the Belgians, from Green
Bay to Sturgeon Bay, managed their own affairs, for the
news of the Belgian coup at Bay Settlement quickly spread.
But after a few years a number of large saw mills were
erected in different parts of the settlement. These saw
mills and their owners, the lumber companies, were the
great destroyers in the twenty-year period after the civil
war. They were not interested in the future welfare of the
district whose timber they were slashing down and resist-
ed the levying of taxes for schools and highways by all
possible means. They therefore had their own candidates
for office, pledged to carry out the wishes of the lumber
bosses. On election day the mills closed down and every
employe was emphatically instructed to vote for the mill
candidate or to look for another job. Tables were also set
up at the polling places where beer and strong liquor was
freely dispensed to all who would accept the ticket backed
by the mill. The mills also had their sets of half dozen
husky fighters whose business it was to go around and inti-
midate the opposition and destroy its tickets. Thus by
threats, free drinks and violence the lumber companies
usually managed to control the elections and thus escaped
paying their share toward the development of the district.

There was no road or trail from Sturgeon Bay to Green
Bay until a year or two after the Belgians had moved in.
Due to the needs of Freeland Gardner who had built a saw
mill in Little Sturgeon Bay, a road was then laid out from
the Bay Settlement to Sturgeon Bay by way of Little Stur-
geon Bay. It followed close to the shore.
A post office was then opened up at Sugar Creek and Michael Schmidt, a German, was the first postmaster. This post office served the whole Belgian settlement, and some of the settlers had ten or twelve miles to go on foot each way to get their mail. As it took some years before the new highway, obstructed by stumps and stones, ravines and swamps, was fit for wheeled traffic, the mail was carried on foot or on horseback. The first mail carrier had the misfortune to lose one of his mail bags, and he saw such dreadful visions of punishment by a stern government awaiting him that he bought a rope and hung himself.

This post office at Sugar Creek and a little store, both managed by Michael Schmidt, were all the public business interests in the Belgian settlement for several years. At the present busy village of Brussels, or Five Corners as it long was called, there was no business enterprise of any kind until 1861 when Francois Pierre opened a small tavern a half mile west of the five corners. About the same time a post office was established there and Pierre became the first postmaster—a position he held for thirty-eight years. He was succeeded by Frank Quartemont who held the office for one year. After him came Moses Gilson who was postmaster for about nine months. Since then Jules Pierre, a son of Francois Pierre, has been postmaster. In 1881 two brothers by the name of George and Matthew Bottkol built a saw mill and grist mill a half mile south of the five corners. Later they sold this property to a company made up of Alex and Francois Pierre, Antoine Virlee and Joseph Dekeyser. This company known as the Pierre-Virlee Co., put in new machinery. They also engaged in general mercantile business, and the new community center became a very busy place. The mill was destroyed by fire in 1917.
A new company was now formed consisting of Eli, Antoine and Joseph Chaudoir. They rebuilt the mill the same year and made it the largest grist mill in the county but only six years later it was destroyed again.

During the many years of wretched highways and no railroads, traveling along the peninsula was chiefly done by means of the steamboats. The first of these local steamers was the side-wheeler Union whose captain was Tom Hawkey. He acquired fame by means of the lugubrious trick whistle of his boat which used to frighten Indians and Belgians alike.

The Hart Line, however, became the principal steamboat line. Captain Henry Hart was the captain of their first steamer, the Welcome, but never was a vessel more misnamed. Many Belgians, having saved up a little money, would buy a ticket in Green Bay which provided transportation from Antwerp clear through to Red River or Little Sturgeon Bay. This they would send to Belgium to enable a relative or friend to come and join them. But when the stub of this ticket eventually was presented to Captain Hart, he would toss it aside, declaring it was no good, and insist on further payment. If any fuss was made he had his mate, Joe Redline, at his elbow. This fellow with foul mouth and steely eyes, as fierce as any ancient buccaneer, always went around with his fists closed, itching to crash into anybody with the exception of the captain who employed him.

In the dining room of the boat was more of the same "Welcome". At the head of the table sat burly Captain Hart, silently devouring fried chicken while the passengers with doubled disgust would try to swallow a little of the strong corned beef that they had to be content with.