THE BELGIAN PIONEERS OF DOOR COUNTY

THE news of this pestilence did not reach Belgium for some time, and meanwhile thousands of other people were preparing to emigrate. Most of them were small cotters living on the estate of big landowners, and, being in very humble circumstances, they were not able to depart so quickly. They made their living chiefly by working in the harvest fields and by thrashing the grain. For cutting, binding and hauling in the grain of the landlord they got every twentieth shock. Later they spent their time all fall and half the winter in thrashing by hand with a flail. For this they also received every twentieth bushel. Thus, for working the greater part of the year, they received one-tenth of the crop which was not much. To this was added a few cents per day for time spent in plowing or doing other work. How alluring then was this prospect of becoming independent farm owners and keeping the whole crop for themselves! To get a share in these riches across the sea became the dominant desire of all who heard these wonderful letters read.

But to most of these laborers with their wretched little incomes it was a most difficult undertaking to save enough money to buy tickets for the family and also lay aside a little surplus on which to live until they could earn a living in the new world. Many of them found it quite impossible,
and with deep dejection resigned themselves to a life of drudgery with the flail. The others proceeded with a system of pinching and saving, watched over with the most relentless frugality. In the meantime came rumors of the cholera ravages among their friends in America. This discouraged many—but then sickness and pestilence appear in every country, and the fragmentary news was now a year old. The more determined therefore continued their preparations. By the spring of 1856, most of them were ready to sail, and thousands of Belgians from the province of Brabant departed to start a new life in the Wisconsin backwoods.

For many of the emigrants of 1856 this venture proved most disastrous. It was a very stormy spring and one vessel with several hundred emigrants was wrecked at sea and all perished. Dysentery broke out on another vessel, the David Otley, and sixty emigrants out of a total of two hundred died on the voyage. A third vessel, the Lacedemon, stormbeaten and crippled, drifted helplessly about for many days until it was able to return to Flushing. Here the emigrants were obliged to spend their meagre funds for provisions, so that many were penniless when they landed in America. They eventually reached Wisconsin. Here they took up the larger part of the remaining vacant lands in the northeastern part of Brown County; spread over several neighboring townships in Kewaunee County; and scattered all over Union, Gardner and Brussels in Door County. Penniless and discouraged from the hard journey, they here met with much unexpected hardship and denial of the necessities of life. They would gladly have left all their hopes of independent prosperity if they could have returned to their humble but accustomed conditions in the
fatherland. But they had no means of returning. They could only pour out their homesick longings in their letters telling of their disappointments. While not all were disappointed, the reports of most of the immigrants were so gloomy that very few were tempted to follow them. There was quite a large emigration in 1857 which was due to the fact that the gloomy reports of those who had emigrated the year before had not yet reached their relatives in Belgium. The Belgian mass emigration from the rural districts came to an end almost as soon as it had started.

Among the earliest settlers in Door County was Mr. Constant Delveaux who died in 1923 at the age of ninety-three years. When he was ninety years old he, at the request of his pastor, Father J. J. Gloudeyans, wrote a short account of his voyage to America and his early years here. This is the only reminiscence left by any of the old pioneers in writing and is given below in Father Gloudeyans' translation. Mr. Delveaux and his companions arrived in Green Bay about the middle of May, 1856, and spent the following summer among old friends in Aux Premier Belges (Robinsonville). In November they moved to their lands in the town of Brussels. His letter follows:

We left Belgium March 18, 1856, to betake ourselves to America. We remained two days in the city (Antwerp) and on the third day we boarded the ship Lacedemon. We left the harbor of Antwerp and proceeded towards the entrance of the channel. There we remained three days before we could raise our sails. Then after a while we passed very close to a ship on which there were some of our neighbors. Our captain informed us that they were going to wait another day but we kept on, but when we were about ten miles out, we encountered such terrific wind that it broke the three masts of our ship. The first mast was brok-
en at the first section (a la premier etage). It was five feet in circumference and the other masts were broken also. The passengers on the other ship were told that the Lacedemon was perishing. Our ship remained listed on its side, drifting helplessly for many days, and signals were given to the city of Flushing. The sailors cut the rope with axes and the vessel righted itself somewhat. A boat arrived from Flushing and towed us to the government shipyard. In order to make repairs it was necessary to get an entire pine tree just as it stood; this they loaded on the shoulders of the men, one on the right, another on the left, in a double row. It was very difficult for us to walk thus together. We stayed 23 days waiting for repairs, but finally we left on April 23rd. We had a beautiful voyage. We arrived in Quebec May 12th. A little boat towed us through the St. Lawrence River. At Quebec we disembarked but left all our baggage on a small boat to be transferred to a boat running from Quebec to Montreal, 60 leagues. At Montreal there was another transfer to take us to Toronto, where we transferred to cars as far as Lake Michigan and from there sailed to Green Bay.

At the time there were very few houses there. My father went to get some meat, and after leaving the butchershop we cooked the meat right there near a cedar grove. A priest, Pere Baudoile (Bonduel), came and spoke to us. He was very glad to see us. Patris had a letter from a priest in Belgium to give to a lawyer in Green Bay, lawyer "Oute" or "Houte"? The lawyer gave him a township plat and said in order to find the landholdings we should find a Mr. Rikare (Ricard) who was able to talk French, being a Mexican. He lived at Red River about 12 miles away from our allotted land. We found him; he took his compass along and took us directly to Section 6, Township 26, Range 24, which was the place he had to find for us. There my father, Ferdinand Delveaux, took four forties of Section 6, Alexis Franc 2, Patris 2, and Dandois 2. They made payment for
the land which they were going to work.

At the time we went to see Mr. Rikare at Red River, we saw some cabins of the savages Indians and I said to Mr. Rikare: "How those people look at us!" He answered: "No wonder; you are the first white people setting foot on land here." Mr. Rikare came to show us our land and we asked him to make us a little map to show us the line we had to follow when returning. The next day we returned all the men together to make little cabins with trees and branches to sleep under. That first night we had a rainstorm so severe that our gun barrels were full of water. That being the first night, things looked very disheartening to us.

These are the families who were the first emigrants to America to settle on Brussels territory: Ferdinand Delveaux and family; Etienne Dandois, his son-in-law; Alexis Franc and Francois Patris. We had become like brothers together on our trip, having chosen our homesteads together. Previous to leaving the old country, Patris and Alexis Franc, who lived an eight hours' walking distance from our home, came to visit us, to talk over our adventure and in order to accompany one another. They came then to assure us we would have no trouble buying our land because they had a letter for the lawyer "Oute", and they gave us useful information.

We lived in our new places here three years without seeing a horse. We finally saw one when a Monsieur Smith (Michael Schmidt) went in company with his wife to start a little store at the bay shore. His wife was on horseback and he went ahead cutting the branches so she would be able to pass. The years we were in the woods we saw savages, but they were honest. They would point to their mouth asking for something to eat. Before entering, they would leave their guns at the door. We had big sturgeon and very good fish to eat. There was also good hunting and plenty of game. However, in 1871 fire destroyed everything. In the parish of Rosiere there were only three houses left, and the next night there was a
heavy rain and all the fire was extinguished.

In 1857 there were many newcomers to buy land in our neighborhood. Antoine Woineaux, Francois Gilson, Pierre Baye, Francois Springlaire, Joseph Quatremon and some others. The second year we were settled here, we had a visit from a priest, Father Daems, on his way back from Sturgeon Bay to Bay Settlement. In Sturgeon Bay he had baptized 23 children and had said mass three times, and for his services, he told me, he had received one dollar and twenty-five cents to take home with him to Bay Settlement. In 1867 the wife of Antoine Woineaux died and they had to carry her all the way to Bay Settlement to be buried there in the cemetery. In 1866 a young man, the son of Ferdinand Delveaux, died at the age of 18 years from sickness. He is the first one who was buried by Father Crude (Croute) at Union, the first one in our neighborhood.

Referring to our arrival in Green Bay: We had considerable difficulty getting our baggage. We had to retransport them to Bay Settlement and the roads were very bad to the bay. There was but one place where there was a little dock where we could leave our baggage. It was late in the month of November, and before coming to our own lands we had planted some potatoes at Premier Belge (Robinsonville or Champion). It took the boat two days to deliver all our baggage. It was freezing quite hard and arriving at night they left all our stuff on the bay shore about three miles from our places with the result that all our potatoes were frozen. Those on the boat were Constant Delveaux, Alexis Franc and Francois Patris.

This is the way we started our work: First we built our houses. Then we cut down the timber. We rolled the logs together to burn them. We always tried to cut the roots at the bottom of the stump to have it easier to carry the ground in sacks and with our axes to plant potatoes and make our gardens, so we always worked to increase our clearing. Later on, when we had oxen,
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clearing land went faster. We seeded wheat and by means of drags with iron prongs we covered it with ground, twice or three times. We had then already fairly good land. Of course we had to make roads in the swamp. We placed heavier logs on both sides and we cut smaller ones to lay across. They were then fixed together something like a bridge. When all the money that we had brought along from the old country was spent, we were obliged to make shingles, a very rude labor, but we had to do so in order to obtain flour to make bread. We went into the woods to cut big fir trees, sawed them into suitable lengths, then carried them home on our backs to make shingles, which again we had to carry to the bay. Even the children had to carry them in bags according to their strength. Shingles were the only thing we could sell to make money. We actually had to eat dry bread. Bankbills (greenbacks) had no more full value, and when we came back from Green Bay with our money, we always lost on the bills we had received in payment. Often we had to hear that our note was only good for 80 cents and sometimes 70 cents on the dollar. When we would go to the store, they would tell us our paper was only good for so much. Banks were collapsing everywhere. All during winter we were making shingles and when winter was passed, we worked in the fields. Wheat was 50 or 60 cents a bushel for many a year. I made ten thousand large sized shingles 1½-inch thick and had to carry them to the bay. All this in order to be able to buy a two-year old heifer which had not yet had her calf. It was hard work to get a cow, but times were hard. Our parents did not see then what we are seeing now—automobiles at all doors, but they have seen misery and want all the time.

Constant Delvaux, son of Ferdinand Delvaux, has written down these informations in order to give knowledge of his voyage to America and his entrance into the woods of Brussels.

This I have done at the request of Rev. J. J. Gloudemans and Mr. Toussaint Mathy who came
to me because I am the oldest man in this neighborhood, having attained the age of 90 years.

CONSTANT DELVEAUX,

Born Aug. 1, 1829.

Mr. Delveaux was born at Grez-Doiceau, Canton de Wavre, Province de Brabant, Belgium.

P. S.: I forgot to tell how we made our houses. This is the way we made our houses. We cut the logs to a size that four persons could carry. We had men from Premier Belge who came to saw them into boards as was done in the olden times and to make us shingles for roofing. They gave us a start to build our houses and we paid them a dollar a day with which they were well satisfied. Besides they taught us how to make shingles.

We brought along from the old country some stones for grinding flour which were three feet in diameter. We had them fixed up for us by our village miller. By means of them we could easily grind a bushel of wheat in one hour with two men working. Once people heard about it, they kept us grinding grain for grinding, and it went night and day. At night we made big wood fires to light up the mill. We would work at two or at four, so it went faster.

CONSTANT DELVEAUX.

The limitations of this sketch do not permit a mention of all the Belgians who settled in this far-flung settlement. The following is a list of those persons, born before 1850, and their families as far as they are known, who came to Door County before the Civil War. A house to house canvass has been made to make the list as complete and correct as possible, but there are reasons to believe that many of those who claimed to have come in 1856 did not come until 1857 and in a few cases even later. The list of pioneers is given in alphabetical order separately for each town—Union, Brussels and Gardner—regardless of the year of
arrival. This list should be compared with the list of land entries given in the next chapter. The list of children’s names is incomplete, due to removals, absence from home and other causes.

**UNION**


1856. Decamp, Pierre. Born 1824. Married Philippine Lampereur 1856. He was the first chairman of the town and held this office for nine years.


1856. DeKeyser, Walter. Born 1844. Married Jo-


1857. Delfosse, Jean B. came to America in 1853 with his sons, Noel, August, Louis and Eugene, spending some time in Philadelphia.


1856. Dupont, Bartholema.


1856. Evrard, Alexander.


1856. Johnson, Jacques.

BRUSSELS


1856. Dachelet, Marie, widow. Children: Marcellon, Toussaint, Julien, Josephine. She had twelve children but six remained in Belgium.


Josephine, Anjoseph, Marie.


1856. Massart, Cornelius.


1857. Mignon, Charles, with his son, Louis. The latter was born 1842 and married Marie L. Gillis 1868. Had five children.


1856. Springlaire, Jean F.

1856. Springlaire, Francois. Married Florence ——


1857. Thiry, Constant.


GARDNER


1856. Quartemont, Francois.

1856. Colignon, Joseph. Born 1834. Married Marie F. Mareaux 1860. Mr. Colignon was County Commissioner, Register of Deeds and County Treasurer for many years.


1856. Debroux, Joseph and his son Alphonse. The latter was married to H. Wautier in 1871.


1856. Docquir, Jean Lambert. Born 1808. Married
Marie T. Oda, 1834.


Children: Selina, Jule, Joseph, Natalie, August, Camille, Henry, Jesse.


