THE FIRST BELGIAN PIONEERS

BETWEEN Green Bay and Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, is a large tract of beautiful farming country—about a dozen contiguous townships in all—which is populated almost exclusively by people of Belgian origin. It is by far the largest rural settlement of people of this nationality in America. Three generations of people have lived and toiled here since this land was reclaimed from the wilderness, but there are still a few old men and women, now approaching a hundred years in age, who remember how this region appeared when they and their parents penetrated into the vast primeval forest that covered it eighty years ago. It is principally from these survivors of the first pioneers that this brief record of their early experiences has been gathered.

The first Belgian known to have visited Wisconsin was Father Louis Hennepin who was born in Ath in the province of Hainault. He came to America in 1675 and took a prominent part in exploring the West. In 1679 he became one of the chaplains in Robert LaSalle's expedition to explore the Mississippi river. He was the first man to describe Niagara Falls near which point LaSalle built his vessel, the *Griffin*. With the rest of the party he sailed on this first vessel to ply the uncharted waters of the Great Lakes to Washington Island, their destination, at the north end of the Door County peninsula. From this point the *Griffin* started back

on its homeward journey, never to be heard from again. With it was lost a fortune in furs which had been obtained from the Indians to defray the expenses of the expedition.

Meanwhile Hennepin with about twenty other men traveled in birch-bark canoes to the south end of Lake Michigan. It was the season of fall storms, and a whole month was spent in traveling the length of Door County.

Eventually the party reached the lower reaches of the Illinois river, and from here Hennepin with two other men were sent to explore the upper Mississippi river which had been discovered only seven years previously. They were the first white men known to have reached St. Anthony Falls, named by Hennepin, now in the heart of Minneapolis. On his way back he traveled by way of the Wisconsin river and the Fox river, stopping for a brief rest at the Jesuit mission on the site of the present city of DePere. As he traveled by canoe, the first day's journey from there would bring him approximately to the site of the present village of Dyckesville, the first favorable camping place he would come to, toward the end of the day's journey. Hé therefore probably camped here, little dreaming that his campsite was later to become the center of the largest settlement of his countrymen in America.

But that was long ago, and very few if any Belgians followed him for almost two hundred years. Eventually a few venturesome souls from the seaports found their way to the new world, but they wrote but few letters home, and their example was not followed by many. It is not known that any Belgians from the farming districts emigrated to America until 1853.

In the early part of that year a farmer by the name of Francois Petiniot from the commune of Grez Doiceau in

the province of Brabant in central Belgium made a business trip to Antwerp. In a tavern of that city he found a pamphlet, describing America, written in the Dutch language, presumably by a Dutch emigrant in one of the western states. This pamphlet was to have great influence in shaping the lives and fortunes of thousands of his countrymen. Petiniot was able to read a little Dutch and became greatly interested in reading the descriptions in this pamphlet of fertile land stretching for hundreds of miles and now lying vacant awaiting the settlement of white man. And when he read that this land could be purchased from the American government for only $1.25 per acre — a mere bagatelle when compared with the high price of land in crowded Belgium — he felt that here indeed was opportunity knocking at the door. His farm in Belgium comprised only four or five acres, but in America he could get a hundred times as much land for what his few acres would bring! This was something to talk about and look forward to. Soon the whole commune was busy discussing the advisability and possibility of emigrating. But here arose the great question: Was the information in the pamphlet reliable, or was it a snare set to catch the foolish and credulous?

Eventually nine other men, small farmers like Petiniot, decided to sell what they had and take a chance on fortune's gift in western America. The names of these ten venturesome pathfinders are as follows: Francois Petiniot, Jean Martin, Philip Hannon, Joseph Moreau, Etienne Detienne, Adrian Masy, Lambert Bodart, Joseph Jossart, Martin Paque and Jean Baptiste Detienne.

Their small farms and personal property were quickly sold, and with the proceeds in their pockets they went to the nearest agent to learn when they could get a ship and the

cost of the passage. They found that a three-masted schooner, *The Quennebec*, was to sail from Antwerp to New York about the middle of May. The tickets would cost about $35.00 for each person above twelve years of age, and they were required to bring their bedding and provisions for at least six weeks.

Then followed a busy time of baking, sewing and packing. Finally, about a week before the time of departure of the vessel, the little party said goodby to their neighbors with many tears, for a journey to America was then considered a separation for life. On May 18th, 1853, *The Quennebec* hoisted her sails.

Arrived on shipboard, they found that copies of their much thumbed pamphlet had found its way into other parts of Belgium and Holland, for there were more than a hundred emigrants on board, many of whom, like themselves, had been persuaded by it to emigrate to the land beyond the sea. The voyage was a hard one, and to the Belgians from the interior, unused to the sea, it was a succession of frightful storms. Once they thought their last hour had come, for the big main mast snapped off and was carried away. But the old ship tossed and swayed and creaked onward over the endless seas for seven weeks. During the last week there was much suffering because the passengers ran out of food and the drinking water was insufficient.

The ten Belgian families had no particular destination in mind when they left home, but on the ocean voyage they decided to accompany the Hollanders to Wisconsin—wherever that was. After an interminable journey on canal boats and lake steamers they eventually reached Milwaukee, full of wonder that the world was so unimaginably big. The Hollanders were going to Sheboygan, near which they had

friends, and the Belgians accompanied them thither. Here there was but little good land left, and the Belgians moreover found to their dismay that they were in the midst of people with whom they were unable to talk. In this dilemma they finally met with a French-Canadian who told them that in Green Bay nearly half the population was French. Furthermore, he assured them that the soil, timber, water and climate was just as good as around Sheboygan. Greatly cheered by this they took passage on a lake steamer which carried them to Green Bay. This was almost like coming home, for in Green Bay the French tongue was not strange.

Leaving their families in Green Bay, the men now went out prospecting for desirable land. After some days of investigation, they finally determined to settle in the vicinity of what is now the city of Kaukauna, twenty miles southwest of Green Bay. They entered the lands which they selected in the government land office in Menasha, and well satisfied with their prospects they returned to Green Bay to fetch their families and baggage.

But here an event happened which made a great change in their plans. When they returned they found that a little sickly child of Phillip Hannon had died the day before, and preparations for its burial were necessary. This delayed the departure of the settlers for a few days and was the means of determining the location of the settlement of about 20,000 Belgians who are now living in Brown, Kewaunee and Door Counties.[1] On the day of the funeral the officiating priest was visited by his friend, Father Edward Daems, the pastor of the last frontier settlement in northeastern

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[1] See Xavier Martin's *Belgians of Northeastern Wisconsin* in *Wis. Hist. Colls.* XIII, page 376.

Wisconsin, known as the Bay Settlement, some ten miles northeast of Green Bay. Father Daems was also a Belgian and was much interested in meeting his countrymen. He was an energetic, friendly young man, full of enthusiasm for his work and for his new country. To the homesick immigrants it was like meeting a long lost brother. They told him of their decision to settle twenty miles south of Green Bay, but to this he would not listen. At Bay Settlement in the opposite direction was his parish. They must see that first for there were many French-speaking people, and the soil was unsurpassed. He would go with them and find them good places to settle, where they could assist at mass and partake of the sacraments, and attend divine worship in their own language.

This last prospect was so inviting, especially to the women, that they decided to go with Father Daems and see the land in his neighborhood. The priest set out ahead with his horse and buckboard, while the immigrants, more slowly, followed along the winding wood-road on foot. The day after they reached Bay Settlement they started off again with Father Daems and another guide to look for land. Eventually, some ten miles northeast of Bay Settlement and many miles beyond the last log cabin, they selected lands in the vicinity of what is now known as Robinsonville, four miles south of Dyckesville. This settlement was afterward known as *Aux Premiers Belges.*

The courage and self-reliance of these first Belgian settlers is remarkable. The place they had selected for their homes lay many miles back in a deep, primeval forest, where not a ray of sunlight filtered through. They saw more Indians than white people, and for a while feared for the safety of their scalps. But the Indians were friendly,

and although the two peoples were unable to talk with each other, they assured each other by smiles and gestures that they had the kindliest feeling toward each other. The winter was mild and the hunting was excellent. Toward spring the Indians initiated the pioneers into the mystery of tapping maple trees and making maple sugar to the great delight of the children. By this time the pioneers had cleared a number of acres and were looking around for oxen with which to plow among the stumps. With good health and sufficient funds to buy the necessities of life these first Belgians were well content in their new homes.

There is a tendency, characteristic of numbers of the earliest emigrational ventures, to describe the conditions in their new homes in golden colors. This is no doubt chiefly due to the fact that such first pathfinders usually are exceptionally hardy individuals whose energy, optimism and self-reliance make them look upon the hardships of a new country as a pleasant sport. Their glowing letters are perhaps also due to a desire to justify their judgment among the home people, for many of the latter had shaken their heads disapprovingly when the first pioneers had left the old neighhorhood.

This triumphant spirit of boastfulness also characterized the letters of the first settlers in *Aux Premiers Belges*. Here, they said, one needed not money nor influence to get on in the world. A kind nature and a liberal government had provided all that was necessary. The soil was marvelously productive, the game was abundant, the climate was excellent,—all one needed to get rich was two willing hands.

To their friends in Belgium unacquainted with the life in the wilderness these letters opened up dazzling prospects.

The letters were passed from hand to hand and read by hundreds, for emigration to America was still such a new idea in Belgium that it seemed a wonderful thing to hear of it. Many of those who were able departed at once for the new country full of pleasant anticipations. In the fall of 1854 every little loghouse in *Aux Premiers Belges* was crowded with new arrivals. Here they were joyfully received, for it was a great pleasure to be united again with their relatives and friends after this long separation.

But alas! These new arrivals brought with them the germs of the deadly Asiatic cholera, and soon the little forest cabins were filled with tears and terror. One after another of these new immigrants died, and many also among their hospitable hosts. It was a sudden and almost unconquerable disease. Strong men, apparently well at night, would be found dead in the morning; the skin on their faces turned almost black and their eyes sunk far back in the sockets. Father Daems' woodland parish had by this time extended so far into districts yet inaccessible to wheeled traffic, that he could attend to only a few of the burials. Most of the victims, attended only by the nearest relatives, were therefore buried back in the woods, usually without coffins and without the rites of the church or the sustaining presence of the priest.