A LITTLE CHURCH HISTORY

WHEN THE early French pioneers of Beau-Pre settled in the wilderness of the St. Lawrence valley, they were much comforted by the report that the Holy Virgin had appeared among them in a vision. This was taken as divine assurance that, although far from the altars and churches of the home land, they were not forgotten by Heaven, but the Mother of God was with them, solicitously interested in their welfare.

As it was in the woods of Beau-Pre, so also was it in the Wisconsin wilderness where the Belgians had sought a home. There, too, the Holy Virgin appeared in person, and the first house of worship was built on the spot blessed by her presence. This is said to have happened August 15, 1858 in the heart of *Aux Premiers Belges*, and there are still many people who remember with what grateful exultation the people received this wonderful testimony of the Virgin's favor.

On that auspicious Sunday morning, Adele Brice, a girl of eighteen, was returning from holy mass in Bay Settlement. She had risen early to get her work done, for she had a ten-mile walk to church, and the woodland path was rough and hilly. After mass she was returning, weary but happy with the joy of youth and the comfort of having done her duty. When near her home she was about to pass between two white-boled birches crowned with a glory of

green leaves, when suddenly, between these birches appeared the Holy Virgin. Dazzled by this heavenly apparition the girl sank to her knees covering her eyes. When she looked up the vision had disappeared. Fervently praying she remained on her knees for some time. Then, when she arose to go, the vision again appeared. Again the maiden was overcome by awe and kneeled in worshipful humility. When she arose again the Virgin appeared for the third time. Strengthened by prayer, Adele now remained on her feet. She could not find words to ask what message the heavenly visitor had for her, but her beseeching eyes presented the petition. Then the Madonna spoke to her, commanding her to teach the children, to devote all her time to it, and to build a chapel on that spot.

It was a long time before Adele Brice could tear herself away from the sacred spot, but finally she went home and told her parents of her vision. Amazed they heard her story and told it to their neighbors. Soon the news had reached to the most distant parts of the settlement, and everyone was discussing it. Some felt grealy exalted at this mark of divine guidance, while others sneered at it as the invention of an excitable and imaginative seeker of sensations. But this latter view did not seem reasonable to many. They had known the young girl from her childhood, and there was nothing remarkable about her except her gentle modesty and her deep religious temperament. She had had access to no books of fiction; where could she have conceived the revolting idea of using the name of the Mother of God for the purpose of deceiving her own people? No, it seemed better to take the story at its face value. Their children needed to be taught, and no one was better fitted to teach them than this devout young woman.

And this view quickly became dominant. From far and near, from Green Bay and the distant cabins in Union, Brussels and Gardner, people came to look on this holy ground. The same fall a chapel was built on the spot and a schoolhouse close by. But the bishop and the local clergy were not among those that believed. They publicly declared that the alleged vision was a myth and an imposition. As Adele Brice continued to affirm the truth of her story, she was even denied the holy sacrament, and for a time was treated as an outcast of the church.

But this made no difference to the Belgian settlers. They did not waver in their faith, but gathered in large numbers to worship at the 'Chapel of the Holy Virgin', as it was called. No priest came near, but on certain days, under the direction of Adele, hymns and even certain parts of the mass would be sung, and she would lead in prayer. Within five years a new chapel was built on the spot, also a church, a larger schoolhouse and a convent in which boys and girls were educated and boarded for a nominal consideration.

Thereafter on each fifteenth day of August thousands of worshippers came to this sanctuary to offer up their devotions. Pilgrims from distant states and cities came here to pray. Many cripples also came and, with a triumphant faith gained in that holy place, were able to walk out whole, leaving their crutches behind. Then, finally, the church authorities could withhold their blessing no longer.

The Belgians of Door county lived too far away to come very often to this hallowed shrine; but they were not forgotten. From time to time came Father Daems on foot to visit them. His meetings were usually held in the house of Guillaume Delwiche near Fairland. A small table cover-

ed with a white cloth served as an altar. On the table stood a crucifix and two polished candlesticks, and the priest, vested in the robes which he had carried on his back all the way from Bay Settlement, would say a low mass and preach to his little congregation. The house of Delwiche was thus for years the sanctuary of the Belgians of Union, Brussels and Gardner, so that when later (1860) a log church was built, a mile east of the Delwiche house, the congregation continued to be called the congregation of Delwiche, and is even to-day quite generally known by that name.

In a few years two parishes were organized and churches were built. The first was St. Hubert's Church which was built a half mile northeast of the present church at Rosiere. The church was destroyed in the fire of 1871, and the question then arose, where should the new one be built? In a rural community no question is more pregnant with trouble than the location of the church. So it also proved here. The trustees decided to build on the main road at Rosiere and were supported in this decision by the majority in the congregation. This did not please the people in the Misere neighborhood who wanted to build the church on or near the old site. The priest, who had had other trouble with the trustees, sided with the group in the north end of the parish and the disagreement became more bitter. The priest denounced the members of the Rosiere faction as blackhearted people, in comparison with whom the Misere people were as white as snow. Having nothing else of importance to talk about, the 'black people' and the 'white people' kept the quarrel going as long as possible, and finally each faction built its own church, which explains why there are two Catholic churches only two miles apart.

Almost simultaneously with the beginning of St. Hu-

bert's parish, another parish, St. Mary's, was organized, and a church was built in 1860 at Fairland. Three acres of land were donated by Alexander Evrard. This parish included the northern part of Union, the northwestern part of Brussels and all of Gardner. As the people in the last town had a long way to go, it was not long before efforts were made to create a mission church in the center of the Gardner settlement. In 1866 a church dedicated to St. John the Baptist was built on the farm of Jean Joseph Robin, and a small tract of land was consecrated as a cemetery. When it became necessary to dig a grave, it was found that the soil in the cemetery was only a few inches deep, so that no graves could be excavated except by the liberal use of dynamite. Here was a perplexing problem. As the cemetery had been officially consecrated, the parishioners felt that it should be devoted to its intended purpose. It was impossible to dig downward, but what was there to hinder them from building the cemetery upward? A stone wall about six feet in height was therefore built around the cemetery, and the hills and knolls of the vicinity were scraped of soil sufficient to fill up the enclosure to the top of the wall. The result was that this "hand-made" cemetery stood up above the surrounding fields like the first story of an Egyptain pyramid.

A little north of this church and cemetery was a swamp about a quarter mile wide extending a long distance east and west. A road had been cut through, but in spring and other times of heavy rainfall the corduroy pavement became impassable because the logs bobbed up and down and floated around, to the great annoyance and discomfort of the churchgoers living north of the church. When the church in 1871 was destroyed in the great forest fire, the parish-

ioners in the northern part of the town (who were in the majority) insisted on building the new church on a site north of the swamp a mile from the old church. This new church was later known as St. Joseph's church.

But the people south of the swamp did not like the idea of going to church with wet feet any more than their brethren to the north. The priest, who also had to cross the swamp, fully agreed with them. Especially was Jean Joseph Robin opposed to any change of location. He personally offered to pay the greater part of the cost of a new church, and with this priestly and financial backing the church of St. John the Baptist was rebuilt on the old site.

But this was not the end of the matter, for committees and delegations, first from one church and then from the other, lumbered down the long road to Green Bay to lay their case before the bishop and claim the episcopal sanction for their respective churches. At first, on the recommendation of the priest, he recognized only the church built by Mr. Robin, but as the delegations from St. Joseph's church did not cease their pleadings, he finally after some years recognized this also. In his comments he remarks that he had more trouble over the church squabble in Gardner than was furnished by all the other parishes in the diocese collectively.

But the church troubles in the town of Gardner were only in their infancy. No sooner had both of these competing churches obtained the blessings of the Church, than some new and most important developments took place. There was in Green Bay a Belgian saloonkeeper by the name of John B. Everts whose wife became very ill. After trying several physicians without success, he was directed to a spiritualistic medium who claimed the gift of healing. His

wife greatly improved during her treatment by the Spiritualist and finally recovered her health. When Mr. Everts paid for the services rendered, the Spiritualist looked at him in a searching manner and said: "You, too, have the gift of healing; you also have the gift of prophecy. If you will stop your business of selling rum and permit the spirits to work through you, you will become a great speaker, bringing messages of power to a people hungering for light." Greatly impressed by this greeting, Mr. Everts, who had hitherto been a sordid saloonkeeper, gave up his former business and later became a noted medium.

Soon after this Mr. Everts came to Gardner to visit relatives. While there he held seances in private houses and many became interested. This came to the attention of the local priest, who in a moment of righteous but unguarded zeal declared that no medium could hold converse with the dead if he (the priest) interposed. A Belgian business man in Green Bay by the name of Duchateau heard of this and offered to bet the priest one thousand dollars that the latter could not make good his claim. The challenge was accepted and June 22nd (1885) in the broad daylight of ten o'clock in the morning was fixed for the contest. At the appointed time practically every person in the town and many from outside points were on hand to witness this duel of supernatural powers. The hour came but not the priest A messenger was dispatched with a horse and buggy to fetch him. The messenger found him home but unwilling to go, claiming that he was not yet fully prepared. However, in view of the circumstances, the priest finally returned with the messenger. But those who had come with vague expectations of seeing the priest wage battle against the formless shades of the dead were disappointed, for the

priest refused to have anything to do with this "infernal business". Instead of that he soundly berated all who were present for listening to heretics, deviltries and false prophets.

This reprimand, delivered in the proper place and time, would probably have been beneficial, but the occasion was not favorable, and the incident resulted in a great victory for the Spiritualists. About forty families left the Catholic Church and united in building a house of worship of their own. One of these new converts, Alexander Dewarzegar by name, discovered within himself supernatural healing powers and became recognized as a medium of intercourse with the spiritual world. The Gardner Spiritualists also received frequent visits from other mediums such as trumpet mediums, materializing mediums and others whose supernatural powers were in high repute.

For some time there was much religious unrest in Gardner as most people did not know what to believe. It may have been this chaotic state of affairs which induced another spiritual freebooter to come here "to fish in troubled waters". This new religious leader was Joseph Rene Villatte, a former French Presbyterian minister who had served a little congregation of Belgians in Green Bay. As the Belgians by nature and antecedents are opposed to Presbyterianism, he saw no future in that field. There were reasons why he could not be ordained a Catholic priest. But in Europe there is a sect known as Old Catholics. They maintain a separate organization, but have practically the same doctrine as the Episcopalians. Mr. Villatte went to Switzerland and obtained ordination from an Old Catholic bishop. Then he returned to Wisconsin and by authority of the Episcopal bishop in Fond du Lac began to proselyte

among the Belgians of Door County. He told his hearers that the present Catholic Church had departed from the faith of the Fathers and was just as filled with error as were the professions of the Spiritualists. Being an able speaker and of very winning personal appearance, he gained many supporters. He also preached regularly in Dyckesville, Red River and Duvall and obtained many converts, but not so many as in Gardner. In 1888 a large church, named The Church of the Precious Blood,was built in Gardner and also a large guild-hall and parsonage. These buildings were at that time the most imposing in the entire Belgian settlement and were made possible by the generosity of Rev. Charles C. Grafton who later became the Episcopal bishop of Fond du Lac.[2] Father Villatte did not believe the Spiritualists would remain long in the field, and with judicious circumspection located his church halfway between the two Catholic churches, feeling sure that the highway difficulty due to the swamp was a matter of only temporary inconvenience which would soon be remedied. This made four churches all within one mile.

Mr. Villatte also conceived the ambition of creating an Episcopal college on the peninsula, and plans and preparations were made for erecting it on a forty-acre tract of land adjoining the church property on the south side. As Villatte had remarkable success in solociting directions from outside friends of his enterprise, the out look for the pro-

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[2] The principal benefactor of the church was Mrs. Mary G. Waterbury as appears from an inscription on a brass tablet on the wall of the church near the altar. It reads: "A. D. 1886. To the Glory of God and in loving memory of Chauncey A. Waterbury—1817-1876 — The Glebe on which this church is built is given by his widow—Mary G. Waterbury."

posed college was good. Old Henry Gigot says, almost every day Villatte would show us a bunch of checks which he had received. He also received large quantities of clothing and shoes which he distributed among the Belgians."

Having succeeded so well in proselyting, which is not often indulged in by Episcopalians, he now conceived the ambition of becoming a bishop. He went to his old benefactor, Bishop C. C. Grafton, and begged him to consecrate him as a bishop, assuring him that this recognition by the Church would result n his conquest of the entire Belgian settlement. As Villatte had only two small congregations in his proposed diocese, Bishop Grafton thought the request was rather premature and declined, whereupon Mr. Villatte set out to seek a bishop's mitre in other parts. From state to state he travelled and from country to country, until finally on the island of Ceylon in the Indian Ocean he found a Jacobite bishop in the city of Colombo who was persuaded to consecrate him. Exultantly he returned to Door County to build his college only to meet total defeat; for his brethren in the ministry, after investigation, claimed that his consecration had been obtained by fraud and misrepresentation. This was followed by excommunication. Villatte departed to parts unknown leaving many staunch friends behind him among the Belgians, for he had gained their trust and affection. For a while the work that he had begun was carried on very ably by Rev. J. B. Gauthier, but upon his death it began to decline. The church, guild-hall and parsonage in Gardner still stand pretty among the trees, but the congregation now numbers only about eighteen families.[3]

[3] Rev. Villatte's work in Gardner and his later sacerdotal ambitions form an interesting chapter in A. P. Curtiss' *History of the Diocese of Fond du Lac*, 1925, Chapter III.

The Church of St. John the Baptist, or Robin's Church as it is generally called, was destroyed by fire in 1894. The little "cemetery in the air" still remains, a great object of curiosity, although its walls have largely crumbled. Most of the members of the church joined the parish of St. Francis Xavier in the adjoining part of Brussels which was organized in 1877. The present beautiful church was erected in 1909.

Another outstanding monument to the religious devotion of the Catholics who worship there is the new St. Hubert's Church now being built at Rosiere. This parish was from the first the most compact and leading part of the entire Belgian settlement and is also now leading in the dignity of its house of worship. The parish lies half in Door County and half in Kewaunee County. Another church on the county line six miles west of Rosiere is known as St. Francis du Paul.

The Belgians are a very religious people and, superintended by the present devoted and capable pastors, their church affairs ar reported to be peaceful and harmonious. But according to creditable testimony it was not always so. Mr. Xavier Martin, who was an intelligent and well informed observer who lived a lifetime in the settlement, gives the following characteristic of some of the early pastors: "The priest was hard to get, and when one would come he was generally a poor specimen of his kind. Some of them were so avaricious that they would refuse to bury a dead child because the parents did not have the ready cash to pay for their services; others were dissipated, some were habitual drunkards; and it was not rare to see a row break out in a church during the service, between the priest and

the officers of his church, terminating in a regular fight, in which there generally came out a whipped priest".[4] Such experiences have not been reported from Door County. Mr. Martin lived in the adjoining part of Kewaunee County.

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[4] The Belgians of Northeast Wisconsin in *Wis. Hist. Colls.* (1895) VIII, page 384.