

THE WALLOON IMMIGRANTS OF NORTHEAST WISCONSIN:
AN EXAMINATION OF ETHNIC RETENTION

by

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the unusually enduring retention of ethnic culture by the Walloon Belgian immigrants who settled in northeastern Wisconsin between 1853 and 1857, as well as the combination of circumstances which enabled this ethnic island to form and continue, well into the twenty-first century. A review of the historiography focusing on European immigrants to the United States from the post-revolutionary period to the present reveals an emphasis on urban settlement and the assumed inevitability of the weakening of ethnic identity. Less attention has been given those immigrants settling in rural areas and even less to those few rural immigrant groups who were able to retain their ethnic culture and identity for several generations. A more complete understanding of the immigrant experience requires closer research into the circumstances experienced by unusual groups such as the Walloons.

Data used have come from a variety of sources, both primary and secondary. Primary sources include letters from Walloon immigrants to relatives still in Wallonia, letters from missionary priests working in the settlement area, Belgian Consul reports, newspaper articles, census data, ownership maps, school records, and the firsthand accounts written by immigrants themselves. Secondary sources include not only the work of historians, but also that of Cultural

Geographers, Social Scientists, Anthropologists, and theologians resulting in a variation of focus and perspective.

Research shows a specific combination of circumstances, not often occurring together, resulted in the successful continuation of the ethnic island formed by the Walloons. The addition of these research results to the study of immigration adds new insight to understanding the immigration experience.

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INTRODUCTION

The approximately thirty million immigrants who came to America between 1820 and 1920 have been the subject of research and analysis by scholars working in a number of disciplines—History, Anthropology, Sociology, and Cultural Geography to name a few. Certainly most immigrant groups coming to the United States wanted to preserve their culture, their language, and their institutions, and to pass this heritage on to their children and grandchildren. Whether settling in urban areas and forming ethnic neighborhoods or establishing themselves in unsettled areas and creating rural ethnic communities, they would have been comforted by the familiar practices of their homeland. And yet, few of these ethnic enclaves remained intact past the second or third generation.

However, there were exceptions—a few immigrant groups scattered across North America which did not adhere to the expected pattern of Americanization and, as such, require closer examination. An ethnic island, sometimes referred to as a folk island by cultural geographers, is usually not composed of more than several thousand people.¹ Forming a close-knit, cohesive, nearly self-sufficient ethnic island, maintaining their religion, language, and customs for many generations, the Walloon Belgians, who initially settled in the wilderness of northeastern Wisconsin between 1853 and 1857, are one such group, reaching a population estimated to be between 15,000 and 20,000 by 1860. Continuing their strong family or clan structure and rituals developed in Wallonia, they have maintained their cultural identity to the present day, participating in the cultural traditions their ancestors brought with them more than a century and a half ago and some still speaking the Walloon dialect. After Indian reservations and the Amish communities, the settlement of Walloon Belgians in northeast Wisconsin is the most enduring ethnic island in the United States.² In the case of Indian reservations, their establishment and continued existence was mandated by federal law. The Amish separation

¹ Terry Jordan and Lester Rowntree, *The Human Mosaic: A Thematic Introduction to Cultural Geography*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1982).

² William Laatch, PhD., Professor Emeritus, The University of Wisconsin Green Bay, interviewed by author, Green Bay, Wisconsin, August 7, 2012.

from the culture around them is by choice and is maintained by their decision to be “different and separate from the world around them.”³ Their decision is reinforced by a complex set of rules geared toward the preservation of their unique society and harsh consequences for those individuals departing from their traditions. Neither set of circumstances applies to the Walloon Belgians. This immigrant group and the unique circumstances which have enabled them to maintain their ethnicity, have been largely overlooked by researchers, leaving a void in our understanding of the circumstances required for ethnic preservation.

For most immigrants who remained in America, the process of acculturation and eventual assimilation occurred, if not immediately, then within the second or third generation, as the children of immigrants yearned for acceptance. Policy makers assumed the desirability of maintaining Anglo-Saxon institutions, the English language, and English-oriented cultural patterns as the standard in American life. The Anglo-Saxon conformity model “has been the most prevalent ideology of assimilation goals in America throughout the nation’s history.”⁴ While immigrants strove to maintain their familiar culture and community structures, most subsequent generations were willing participants in the “Americanization” process, working to learn English and adopt American culture, behavior and values in order to fit in and achieve upward mobility. By the later part of the nineteenth century, this became a process of coercion when necessary as the native, middle class pressed conservative, WASP values on immigrants.⁵ To fit in, the newcomers had to change cultures. “Assimilation required unconditional surrender of pre-migration ways of life.”⁶

Milton Gordon, one of the leading mid-twentieth century analysts of assimilation, systematized the process into two categories. Behavioral assimilation involved adopting cultural patterns such as learning English, participating in communal worship, and developing more intimate primary relationships with the dominant culture such as patterns of friendship and inter-

³ Alice Theodora Merten Reclin, *Spatial Behavior of the Old Order Amish of Nappanee, Indiana* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Geographical Publication No. 18, 1976) 27.

⁴ Milton M. Gordon, “Assimilation in America: Theory and Reality,” *Daedalus* no. 2, Ethnic Groups in American Life (Spring, 1961), 266.

⁵ James R. Barrett, “Americanization from the Bottom Up: Immigration and the Remaking of the Working Class in the United States, 1880-1930,” *Journal of American History* 79, no. 3 Discovering America: A Special Issue (December, 1992) 996-1020.

⁶ Christiane Harzig and Dirk Hoerder, *What is Migration History?* (Malden, Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2009) 43.

marriage. Structural assimilation involved more impersonal, public aspects of an immigrant's life such as his means of earning a living, his civic involvement, and organizations of which he became a member.⁷ The underlying assumption is that the immigrants settled in urban areas where a dominant Anglo-American culture existed and into which the immigrant would eventually and willingly blend.

Another prevalent theory providing a framework for the study of immigration involved the idea of America being a melting pot wherein various ethnic groups blend together to form an "American." From the eighteenth century onward, there were those who viewed the influx of immigrants from non-English homelands, and their effect on existing institutions and on each other, as creating a totally new "American."⁸ Other scholars saw the development of three melting pots forming along religious lines, Protestant, Catholic, and Jew, with ethnicity fading in importance within each religious group. Again there is the assumption of urban settlement where the intermingling of ethnic groups would occur, as well as a willingness on the part of immigrants to abandon their ethnic heritage.⁹ Concurrent with these theories of assimilation was one of cultural pluralism, wherein the culture of an immigration group would be retained, but within the larger political framework of the United States.

In the 1960s, as the idea of a superior Anglo-American core lost credibility, there was a movement away from analyzing immigration in terms of assimilation. A major shift in thinking occurred with the publication of Rudolph Vecoli's work, in which he disagreed with the idea of immigrants being alienated, disorganized, and almost helpless against the pressures of a dominant culture and instead stressed the tenacity of ethnic groups in maintaining an identity in urban settings.¹⁰ Vecoli also took issue with the practice of generalizing about immigrant groups based on country of origin. He stressed the importance of studying individual groups based on

⁷ Gordon, 279.

⁸ Ibid., 270

⁹ Ruby Jo Reeves Kennedy, "Single or Triple Melting Pot? Inter-marriage Trends in New Haven, 1870-1950," *American Journal of Sociology* (January 1944) 332, 338. Also see Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1956) 45-51.

¹⁰ Rudolph Vecoli, "Contadini in Chicago: A Critique of The *Uprooted*," *Journal of American History*, no. 3 (December, 1964) 408.

region of origin, economic base, and social characteristics.¹¹ This approach was supported by other immigration historians who further developed the idea that immigrant groups were not homogeneous, but rather were often divided by religion and politics.¹² The Walloons of southern Belgium are excellent examples, as they did not even speak the same language as the Flemish Belgians of northern Belgium. Vecoli's approach fostered additional research pertaining to ethnic groups and a renewed awareness of the diversity of immigrants existing together in American cities.¹³ A research perspective developed by one group of historians focusing on emigrant adjustment advanced the theory that ethnic identity was a constantly evolving process prompted by accommodation to other emigrant groups as well as to the dominant culture.¹⁴ However, the Walloons who settled in the isolation of the northeastern Wisconsin wilderness were not subjected to outside influences. This was a major factor toward the retention of their ethnic culture into the twentieth-first century. Additionally, increased research was done in the field of labor history as well as the field of racial identity.

John Bodnar's landmark book, *The Transplanted, A History of Immigrants in Urban America*, was published in 1985. Focusing on the period from approximately 1820 to 1940, Bodnar's work presented a synthesis of new ways to consider the European immigrant experience. While recognizing that the immigrants' primary concern was maintaining the family unit, Bodnar's focus was the process by which immigrants confronted and accommodated to capitalism, first in their native country with the disruption of the cottage industries many rural families developed as a way of supplementing their meager farming production, and eventually in their new urban environments where they sought wage labor in the capitalist system. As with other historians, Bodnar focused on the everyday life experiences of urban immigrants. While he acknowledges that millions of immigrants settled in rural areas, and that their story is important and should be told, he then returns to his study of the retention of ethnicity among urban

¹¹ Rudolph J. Vecoli, "The Formation of Chicago's 'Little Italies'," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, no. 2 (Spring, 1983) 16, 18.

¹² Kathleen Neils Conzen, et. al., "The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the U.S.A." *Journal of American Ethnic History*, no. 1 (Fall, 1992) 4.

¹³ Russell A. Kazal, "Revisiting Assimilation: The Rise, Fall, and Reappraisal of a Concept in American Ethnic History," *The American Historical Review*, no. 2 (April, 1995) 452-453.

¹⁴ Conzen, et. al., 5.

immigrants.¹⁵ Some research has been done on the experiences of rural immigrants but more attention needs to be directed to that segment of immigration history.¹⁶ Additional work has been done on the influence of various ethnic groups on each other, and between the ethnic group and the dominant culture. This theory explores how immigrants have been required to develop an ability to function in more than one culture and posits that consequently, ethnic groups constantly reinvent themselves.¹⁷

However, little attention has been given to ethnic groups that were unique in their enduring successful resistance to established patterns of settlement and accommodation in their new lives after immigration. The Walloons, one such group, did not participate in even the initial stages of acculturation for several generations after their immigration and when they did, it was only in limited areas of their choosing. The fact that the Walloons did not fall into the patterns established by immigration historians, and did not lose their distinctive ethnicity, makes them especially important for study.

The volume of immigration to the United States was relatively low before the early nineteenth century but dramatically increased as the century progressed. Between 1815 and 1860 alone, more than five million immigrants traveled to the United States.¹⁸ Despite the endurance of the myth that most European immigrants were fleeing oppressive European governments in search of religious and political freedom, most immigrants traveling across the Atlantic Ocean to North America came for economic reasons. As early as the sixteenth century “the English colonizers in the middle colonies, originally pursued ‘get-rich-quick schemes,’” such as searching for gold mines, and by the seventeenth century began the development of tobacco plantations.¹⁹ The myth that New England settlers were seeking religious or political freedom, sometimes referred to as the myth of Plymouth Rock, does not bear close scrutiny. Without doubt, religion was an important factor for the Pilgrims and Puritans who immigrated in the

¹⁵ John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) xvi. Also Mark Wyman, *Round-Trip to America: The Immigrants Return to Europe, 1880-1930* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993).

¹⁶ See Kathleen Neils Conzen, *Immigrant Milwaukee 1836-1860* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1976) John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the American Prairie* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986) and *Ethnicity on the Great Plains*, edited by Frederick C. Luebke (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁸ Donna R. Gabaccia, *Immigration and American Diversity: A Social and Cultural History* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2002) 75.

¹⁹ Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 118.

seventeenth century, but they were always in the minority of those settling New England.²⁰ The majority of immigrants to the United States came for economic reasons, either looking for land upon which to establish plantations or family farms or, after the 1860s, for jobs in industrial centers. "Labor, rather than liberty, remained the overriding concern in the decision to move to the United States."²¹ Some planned to stay only long enough to find work, save as much of their earnings as possible, and then upon reaching their monetary goal, return to their home country with their carefully saved wages to buy land or establish a business, ultimately achieving a better life there. This was particularly true among immigrants coming to the United States after 1860.²² Others, after experiencing life in the United States, were disappointed for various reasons and moved on—either trying their luck in another host country or returning to their homeland.

Typical of immigrants from northwestern Europe prior to 1860, the first Walloons to leave their homeland were primarily artisans and small independent farmers who were threatened by new industrial processes and labor saving machinery which was becoming more and more widespread. Characteristic of this wave of immigration, and unlike the larger wave to follow after 1860, they left in family groups, had money to finance their trip and get a start in the United States, and did not plan to ever return to Belgium.²³ However, once in the United States, their experiences set them apart from most other contemporary immigrant groups.

Walloon emigration resulted from the classic combination of difficult conditions in the sending society which propelled them toward emigration and appealing opportunities available in the receiving society. Once in this country, the Walloons experienced circumstances that enabled them to maintain their unusual ethnic cohesiveness and continuity. This combination of circumstances warrants further study. A shared region of origin, a shared religion, and a shared dialect greatly affected the development of the Walloon settlement area. Once in this country, virtually all Walloons proceeded to the same destination in northeast Wisconsin, determined to

²⁰ Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2002) 17, 42-43.

²¹ Max Paul Friedman, "Beyond 'Voting with their Feet': Toward a Conceptual History of 'America' in European Migrant Sending Communities, 1860s to 1914," *Journal of Social History* no. 3 (Spring, 2007), 557. Also see Jordon and Rowntree, 281.

²² John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 53. Also see

²³ *Ibid.*, 56.

maintain the rural village life-style which, due to overpopulation and industrialization, had proven increasingly difficult in their homeland.

The Walloons chose to settle in a wilderness that was located in the southern part of a peninsula extending from the main body of the state, northeast into Lake Michigan. There were few other settlers on the peninsula when the Walloons chose their land and, because they located on a peninsula, there was little reason for outsiders to travel through the area. Reinforcing their isolation was the fact that the land they chose was primarily inland resulting in little contact with the water traffic that went on along the peninsula coasts. While showing great resourcefulness and adaptability in the face of environmental challenges, isolation, and natural disasters, the Walloons were able to preserve the cultural patterns which provided them with the comfort of their familiar ethnic traditions. Retaining a strong feeling of group identity, this small, cohesive, and homogeneous group has remained a viable ethnic island into the twenty-first century. Understanding their unique set of circumstances is an important and necessary challenge for achieving a more complete understanding of the history of the immigrant in the United States.

CHAPTER 1

THE EMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

In 1830, the small country of Belgium, which had been a part of the Netherlands since 1815, staged a successful revolution against its Dutch rulers. Fighting went on for another nine years as King William I, ruler of the Netherlands, refused to recognize Belgian independence. Finally, in 1839, at the First Treaty of London, the major European nations agreed that Belgium was to be recognized as an independent and perpetually neutral nation. The Belgians formed a constitutional monarchy, established a parliamentary system of government, and made the government ministers responsible to parliament.²⁴ Although Belgium became an independent nation, it is made up of two distinct and different groups of people. Found primarily in the north are the Flemish who speak a Germanized Dutch. The Walloons are found in the southern part of Belgium and speak a French patois.

However, even with the establishment of their own independent government the Belgians faced great challenges. Although they now enjoyed freedom of religion, a liberal government, and good schools for their children, most Belgians lived in deep poverty and struggled to meet their most basic needs. Belgium encompassed some of the richest farm land in Europe, but it also contained the highest population density. The land had been divided so many times that few families farmed enough land to support themselves. In 1846, eighty-five percent of Belgian farms were less than twelve acres and sixty-six percent were less than two and a half acres. These “farms” were little more than garden plots. Adding to the difficulty inherent in the diminishing size of the farms from which a family attempted to sustain itself, from 1845 to 1850 the same potato blight that devastated Ireland destroyed the potato crop in Western Europe.²⁵ In 1845, potato production in Belgium fell from 850,000 tons to 111,000 tons, an eighty-seven percent drop compared to normal years. The crop in 1846 was slightly better but there was still a forty-three percent drop compared to normal years. Exacerbating the potato shortage was a concurrent severe drop in cereal crop yields. Rye crop production of 1846 represented a fifty percent drop

²⁴ Robert Ergang, *Europe Since Waterloo* (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1967) 48.

²⁵ Françoise Lempereur, *The Walloons in Wisconsin* (Jambes, Belgium: Centre d'Archeologie, d'Art et Histoire de Jambes, 2012) 30.

from normal production and wheat production was also well below normal levels.²⁶ This combination of crop failures resulted in severe food shortages in Western Europe and particularly in Belgium.

In response to the declining size of family farms, rural Belgians had developed various cottage industries over the years such as weaving, straw plaiting, nail making, cutlery, distilling, and sugar milling to supplement their agricultural income. As the industrial revolution gained momentum and transportation networks developed, less expensive manufactured goods became available in rural areas and marked the end of the home industries which could not compete, creating greater economic challenges for the rural population.²⁷ Some rural inhabitants left the countryside looking for work in Belgium's developing industrial centers, but the working conditions in the factories were appalling. Children as young as eight or nine were working from 5 a.m. until 8 p.m. Adult male workers were paid an average salary of one franc a day (roughly the equivalent of \$5.25 in today's terms). Women were paid half that.²⁸ Clearly, an alternative was desperately needed.

This was also a period of great challenges and changes on the western side of the Atlantic Ocean. Following the War of 1812, the boundaries as well as the population of the original Northwest Territory increased dramatically. By 1835, the population of the western area of the Michigan Territory had increased enough to warrant the creation of a new territory and on July 4, 1836, an act of Congress created the Wisconsin Territory. The first territory census was taken in August of that year and the results showed there to be only 11,683 non-Indians residing in the entire area between Lake Michigan and the Dakotas. Westward migration gained momentum and by 1847 the territory had a population of 210,456 settlers desiring statehood. A state constitution was written and adopted in March 1848 and by May of that year President Polk approved an act of Congress whereby Wisconsin (Figure 1.1) was admitted to statehood.²⁹

²⁶ Eric Vanhaute, Richard Paping, and Cormac O'Grada, "European Subsistence Crisis of 1845-1850: A Comparative Perspective," paper presented at the XIV International Economic History Congress, Helsinki, Finland, August 21-25, 2006.

²⁷ "1852: Emigration of the Farmers From Brabant and Hesbayne," Wisconsin French Connections, <http://www.uwgb.edu/wisfrench/library/history/belges/wibelges.htm> [accessed January 27, 2013].

²⁸ Jan-Albert Goris, "Oppressed Flanders to the Most Beautiful Country in the World," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Summer, 1959, 275-281.

²⁹ Deborah B. Martin, *History of Brown County Wisconsin Past and Present* (Chicago: The S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1913) 162.

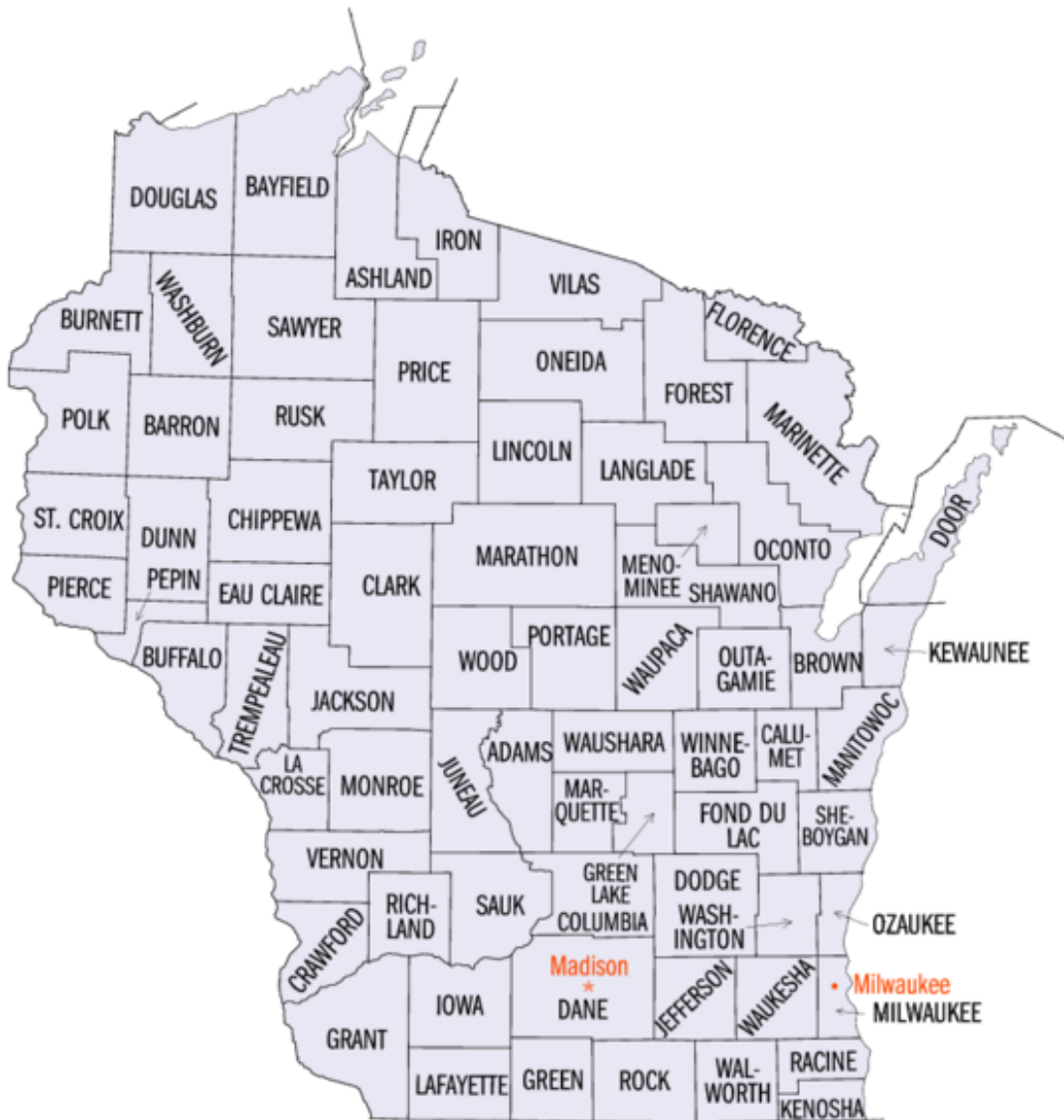


Figure 1.1 - The State of Wisconsin showing counties

Source: Wikipedia

The challenge then became attracting settlers, and especially farmers, to populate the new state. One step toward accomplishing this was Wisconsin's establishment of the position of Immigration Official. This person was to live in New York City and help new arrivals to a final destination, presumably in Wisconsin; to protect them from being victimized once they arrived; and report on the nationalities and occupations of the incoming immigrants. An emigration agency was established in New York with G. W. Van Steenwyck employed as the first Wisconsin State Commissioner of Immigration.³⁰ Equally important, he was to advertise extensively in the foreign language press of Europe, praising the virtues of Wisconsin and encouraging settlement. Apparently Mr. Steenwyck was diligent in the performance of his work. In 1855 alone, records indicate he handed out 22,000 pamphlets in New York City.³¹ In addition, Steenwyck was responsible for sending pamphlets, posters and booklets to various countries in Europe, all printed in the appropriate languages. One such poster distributed in Belgium read:

Come! In Wisconsin all men are free and equal before the law. Religion is free and equal between church and state. Opportunities are unlimited for those who want to work. Good land can be purchased from the generous American government for \$1.25 an acre. The soil is adapted to raising corn, wheat, rye, oats, barley and vegetables—all products with which the Belgian husbandman familiar.³²

This recruitment policy of the government was aided by various privately published pamphlets extolling the desirability of settlement in Wisconsin, available for free or for a very low price. The *Guide 'a l'Emigrant Wallon* by Eugene-Felix Roussel sold for one franc (approximately \$5.50 in today's currency). By the middle of the nineteenth century, Wisconsin was the number one destination of Walloon emigrants.³³

A second factor influencing potential immigrants was aggressive recruiting done by the Antwerp shipping companies operating the trans-Atlantic routes. On the eastbound trip from

³⁰ Jeanne Rentmeester, *The Flemish in Wisconsin*, (1985) 24.

³¹ Francis Favill Bowman, *Why Wisconsin* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997) 40.

³² Math S. Tlachac, *The History of the Belgian Settlements in Door, Kewaunee, and Brown Counties* (Belgian-American Club: Algoma, Wisconsin, 1974), 6.

³³ Lempereur, 40.

America to Europe, the ships were loaded with cargo such as timber, cotton, or tobacco. To maximize profits the ship owners sought to load the westbound ships with passengers, and they paid agents who traveled through the countryside bent on recruiting passengers a generous amount for each ticket sold. The Antwerp ship owners obtained the support of the Belgian government and began a campaign to attract immigrants to depart from their port. Belgian railroads also participated and offered free transport of luggage to Antwerp.

The four major shipping companies were A. Strauss Shipping Company, Serigiers & Company, Leroy & Steinmen, and Strecker, Klein & Stock. These four companies competed for the lucrative passenger business by placing large advertisements in local newspapers showing departure schedules and hiring local agents to persuade potential passengers. Adolphe Strauss, owner of the shipping line with whom the first group of Walloons chose to book passage, went so far as to publish sworn affidavits allegedly from Belgians who had already made the trip to the United States and were very happy with their experience. In reality, many of these testimonies were falsified.³⁴ Strauss and his agents scoured the countryside searching for immigrants to fill his departing ships in Antwerp. The Belgian government did what it could to caution potential immigrants. On May 7, 1856, the government issued a warning not to make prepayments and to deal only with the Office for Emigration at Antwerp. A notice from the Leuven Court of Justice dated November 6, 1857 requested police to watch for agents of shipping companies using fraudulent practices.³⁵

The Belgian government, seeing emigration as a possible way to alleviate the overpopulation and underemployment crisis with which it was struggling, went so far as to organize the forced emigration of ex-prisoners, mentally delayed citizens, and the poor who were receiving government assistance. An estimated 650 forced emigrants actually made the journey but the government discontinued the program when protests developed in the American press.³⁶ The *New York Daily Times* reported that city officials arrested one shipload of Belgians when they disembarked at the port and “for their poverty or their suspicious manners they were consigned to

³⁴ Lempereur, 32

³⁵ Rentmeester, 399.

³⁶ Lempereur, 30.

jail.” Three days later a judge ordered they be released on a writ of habeas corpus.³⁷ In the same issue, the newspaper published a scathing letter written by New York Mayor Fernando Wood denouncing the court’s actions. “They are now at large, whether for weal or woe, remains to be seen.” The mayor objected to the expense these Belgian paupers would be for the city, advocated that in the future they not be allowed to come ashore, and that they instead be forced to return to Antwerp.³⁸

There was one more factor, often overlooked, that influenced a small number of Belgians to immigrate and undoubtedly had a bearing on the initial group that came to the United States in 1853. During the first half of the nineteenth century, Western Europe experienced a religious revival which challenged the humanistic ideas of the Enlightenment. This movement, known as *Le Reveil*—The Awakening—attracted followers in America as well as Europe and impacted many Catholic clergy as well as lay members of the Catholic Church. After the Belgian Revolution in 1830, religious tolerance was established and those liberal Catholic clergy who had questioned church teachings and were then defrocked, were now free to preach the new, reformed ideology. Protestant groups began to form throughout Belgium, especially in the Walloon Brabant region. In 1842 the Belgian Evangelical Society, later known as the Christian Missionary Church of Belgium, was established and by 1847 a small Protestant church had been built near Grez-Doiceau, the home canton of the first group of Walloons to come to Wisconsin. (A canton, also known as a commune, was the local level of governmental organization in Belgium, consisting of units as small as a village or as large as a city.)³⁹ The now defrocked, former Catholic priest M. J. B. Vleugels was the Protestant pastor of this small congregation and actually encouraged members of his church to emigrate—perhaps out of concern regarding their bleak economic situation. Also, he may have mistrusted the 1831 Belgian Edict of Toleration in light of his own experience with the Catholic Church’s intolerance. Whatever his reasons, enough of his parishioners left Belgium that by 1854 the Belgian Evangelical Society ceased to exist. Although

³⁷ “Dismissal of the Belgian Prisoners.” *New York Daily Times*, February 27, 1855.

³⁸ “The Imprisoned Belgians.” *New York Daily Times*, February 27, 1855.

³⁹ Myron P. Gutmann and Etienne van de Walle, “New Sources for Social and Demographic History: The Belgian Population Registers,” *Social Science History* no. 2 (Winter, 1978): 123.

they communicated by letter, Vleugels never saw his former parishioners again as when he emigrated, he chose to go to Toronto.⁴⁰

Just how the information encouraging immigration to Wisconsin actually reached the Brabant Walloons is not known, but the often repeated and generally accepted account involves a small farmer from Grez-Doiceau by the name of Francois Petinoit who in March of 1853 had made a trip to Antwerp for business. While in Antwerp, he came across one of Steenwyck's pamphlets praising the possibilities of life in Wisconsin. Belgian is not a written language and the pamphlet was printed in Dutch, but Petinoit read enough Dutch to make out the almost unbelievable description—limitless fertile land available for between 60 cents and \$1.25 an acre (the equivalent amount in 2010 would be \$17.28 to \$36.00 an acre, meaning a forty acre tract of the finest land could be purchased for the 2010 equivalent of \$1,440). It was this perceived opportunity, impossible in Wallonia, that motivated emigration from the Brabant and Hesbaye areas.

Few individuals made the decision to migrate without lengthy discussions with their families. Historians agree that the family was the fundamental unit wherein such momentous decisions were made.⁴¹ Especially among northern Europeans in the mid eighteenth century, the nuclear family was the primary unit, wherein husbands and wives depended on each other economically.⁴² A decision as important as migration would surely have been discussed at length and required the support of the entire family. Besides the kinship network, neighborhood relations and access to information also played an important part in the decision.⁴³ For the thousands of Walloon immigrants who followed, the letters from friends who emigrated before them had a great impact on their own decision to emigrate. But this first brave group had only their faith in the validity of the information contained in a Dutch the pamphlet upon which to base their decision.

⁴⁰ The account of The Awakening and its effect on the Belgians of the Brabant region can be found in several works. See Judith Carlsen, "Amazing Grace," *Voyageur Historical Review of Brown County and Northeast Wisconsin* 28, No. 1 (2001): 35-43 as well as Lempereur, 34-36. An account from a Catholic perspective can be found in the work of Antoine de Smet, Assistant Librarian of the Royal Belgian Library, published in 1953 found in "Antoine de Smet," vertical file, Belgian Collection, University of Wisconsin, Green Bay.

⁴¹ Adam McKeown, "Global Migration," *Journal of World History* 15, No. 2 (June 2004):178. Also see Donna Gabaccia, "The Transplanted: Women and Family in Immigrant America," *Social Science History* 12, no. 3 (Autumn 1998).

⁴² *Ibid.*, 181.

⁴³ Dirk Hoerder, "From Immigration to Migration Systems: New Concepts in Migration History," *OAH Magazine of History* 14, no. 1 (Fall, 1999): 6.

There were a few individuals who had emigrated in the preceding years, but they were rare. Charles-Louis Desmedt, accompanied by his wife and daughter, immigrated to Wisconsin in 1845 and bought land north of Milwaukee to farm. In a long letter to his brother, which was published several times in Belgian newspapers, Desmedt gave a detailed account of the challenges of their trip, the beauty of the land, the price of everything from travel to livestock to food to equipment, and reassurance of the kindheartedness and gentleness of the few remaining "savages" on the frontier. However, he goes on to say, "Although I write this truly, I would not have as my purpose to entice you to come. It is up to you to scrutinize my letter and to see if you could make a living here. Money is not enough. One has to have good hands." However, he then immediately returns to praising his new life, saying, "I live in freedom, in harmony with Mother Earth."⁴⁴ As informative as Desmedt's letter is, however, due to his origin in the Flemish area of Belgium, there is no reason to assume the Walloons would have had knowledge of it.

Once at home, with his pamphlet in hand, Francois Petiniot spoke with his family and neighbors and together, a small group of eighty-one people made the decision to sell their little farms and all their personal property and make the trip to the United States. With the money from the sale of their few acres of land and other property, they would be able to buy large tracts of fertile, virgin land in Wisconsin. The ticket price was 185 francs for each adult (the equivalent of more than \$1,000 in today's dollars) and most in the original group had enough to pay the expenses of the trip and still have money left with which to start their new life once they reached their destination.⁴⁵ By May of 1853, unaccustomed to travel and most never having seen a ship or any large body of water, the group was ready to leave for Antwerp.

Conditions on the ships bringing immigrants to the United States were deplorable. As early as 1849 the United States government passed An Act to Provide the Ventilation of Passenger Vessels and for Other Purposes, which specified amounts of water and food a ship was required to carry depending on the number of passengers.⁴⁶ The Belgian government also responded to the inhumane treatment of emigrants and in 1850 issued a royal decree specifying

⁴⁴ The letter, translated by Jan-Albert Goris, is kept in his family archives. It was published under the title "Oppressed Flanders to the Most Beautiful Country in the World," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Summer, 1959, 275-281.

⁴⁵ Lempereur, 48, also Defnet, et. al., 19.

⁴⁶ "Act to Provide for the Ventilation of Passenger Vessels, and for Other Purposes," Immigrant Ships Transcribers Guild, <http://immigrantships.net/v3/1800v3/oldengland18540904.html> [accessed February 23, 2013].

the minimum amount of space each passenger should have to sleep, wash, and prepare food. Additionally, unmarried adults of different genders could not be required to share a sleeping space. Each passenger was required to submit to a health inspection, present a passport and ticket, and have a baptism or marriage certificate.⁴⁷ Unfortunately these requirements were often overlooked.

As time passed and the number of immigrants seeking passage increased, abuses also increased as shipping companies developed ways to exploit unsophisticated Belgian immigrants. Originally passengers were instructed to bring their own food, water, and bedding. Instructions for the passengers were usually printed on the steamship ticket. One company's ticket stated the following:

Each passenger will be furnished the following rations weekly: Seven pounds of ship's bread, two pounds of salt pork, two and one-quarter pounds of flour, one pound of salt herring, and a daily ration of one can of water for drinking, cooking, and washing purposes. These rations are furnished from the ship's supplies, but each passenger must furnish his own butter, sugar mustard, syrup, pepper and vinegar. Each passenger is responsible for bringing his own bed clothing and tin dishes for eating, drinking, and washing purposes.

The further information was added: "The ship's master has the right to withhold water rations until the promenade deck has been swept and cleaned each day by the passengers."⁴⁸

Ship owners soon realized it would be more profitable for them to raise the ticket price and have it include food and water for the passage, rather than have the travelers bring their own provisions. However, this proved to be another way passengers were exploited. In letters back to friends and family members in Belgium, immigrants communicated numerous complaints regarding the poor quality of the food given to the passengers—some even stating the food was

⁴⁷ Rentmeester, 25.

⁴⁸ Lee W. Metzner, "Belgians in the North Country," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, March, 1943, 285.

inedible.⁴⁹ Water was also limited and there were instances of fresh water being given to the crew while the immigrants were given bilge water.

Some shipping companies went so far as to publish specific instructions for the travelers pertaining to baggage.

Personal effects should be packed in boxes three-feet long, three-feet high and two feet wide, and not in barrels, with a maximum weight of two-hundred pounds. The trunk must have solid handles and the name of the owner. You will not have access to this trunk during the voyage as it will be stored down in the hold.⁵⁰

Many emigrants brought tools of their trade, seeds for planting once they had obtain their land, and items for cooking and sewing. There is a record of one farsighted emigrant who managed to bring a millstone so heavy it required the help of several men to load on to the ship. There were few gristmills in the entire Wisconsin region, and knowing they would be going to an unsettled area, he realized there would be a need for the millstone to grind the wheat and other grain they would raise into a useable form.⁵¹

Ship owners soon found an additional way to defraud the emigrants. This involved the second leg of their journey—transit from their debarkation port to their eventual inland destination. Agents in Belgium would sell a “combination ticket” that was to include the entire trip, all the way to Milwaukee or Green Bay. Unfortunately, when the immigrants arrived in New York City, or sometimes Chicago, they learned their tickets were not going to take them any farther. For example, in March, 1856, five family heads, Joseph Janquet, Joseph Brice, Peter Joseph Lalunne, Henry Destree, and John Joseph Jandrin lodged official complaints at the New York Office of the Commissioners of Emigration against the “misconduct on the part of one Adolphus Strauss.” The immigrants were assured by Strauss that he had agents at all the inland stops between New York City and Green Bay, who would transport their baggage, and provide them with lodging and meals along the way. Their affidavits stated they had paid 1060 francs,

⁴⁹ Lempereur, 45.

⁵⁰ Rentmeester, 29.

⁵¹ Ibid., 31.

900 francs, 850 francs, 720 francs, and 975 francs respectively, to transport themselves and various family members to Green Bay.⁵² The Commissioner informed the Belgian Consul that when this group found the named contact person in New York, he denied that he had any business dealings with Strauss or any arrangement with him for the forwarding of these people to their final destination.⁵³ They then had to pay for the remaining part of the voyage—again! In addition to illustrating the fraudulent activities many Belgian emigrants were subjected to, the incident reinforces the fact that these people were not poverty stricken. They were families of some means with the foresight to realize the situation in Belgium offered little hope of sustaining a comfortable lifestyle and certainly even less for their children.

As noted earlier, during the brief years of Walloon emigration numerous reports were made against Adolphus Strauss, the ship owning magnate, complaining of the treatment the passengers received, particularly citing the poor quality and shortages of food and the undrinkable water. However, Strauss, knowing he had the backing of the Antwerp port officials and also knowing that he was not being closely watched by authorities, continued to operate for several more years.⁵⁴ As late as 1870 he published notices in *Les Petites Affiches de Jodoigne*, a weekly advertising newspaper, giving a list of destinations, claiming the lowest prices, and inviting potential travelers to contact him for further information.⁵⁵

In a letter addressed to the Belgian Department of Foreign Affairs, dated May 12, 1856, Adolph Poncelet, Belgian Consul to Chicago, outlined the numerous complaints he received regarding both the poor treatment of the passengers onboard ships and the worthless tickets sold to immigrants before they left Belgium. Eventually notices were posted in public places

⁵² This would be the equivalent of \$6,015, \$5,184, \$4,896, \$4,147, and \$5,616 in 2010. "Passenger Complaints, 1855-1856," Vertical File, Belgian Collection, University of Wisconsin at Green Bay. Letter and affidavits from Secretary Cadderly, Office of the Commissioners of Emigration to H. W. T. Mali, Esquire, Consul for Belgium.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Lempereur, 32

⁵⁵ *Les Petites Affiches de Jodoigne*, 1870.

throughout Belgium with the following warning:

Travelers having the intention to emigrate to the transatlantic countries cannot distrust too much the contracts or commitments that people want them to sign, concerning paying in advance in Europe their transportation and that of the destination to which they plan to move.⁵⁶

The group from Grez-Doiceau boarded an old, American three-masted ship named the *Quinnebaug* and on May 17, 1853, set sail. There were a total of 180 passengers on board, eighty-one being Walloon and the remaining ninety-nine being Dutch. All of the Walloon men were farmers but, in addition to tending their farms, many of the family heads listed their occupation as some type of artisan. There were several stonecutters, two joiners, a barber, a locksmith, a baker, a bricklayer, and a shoemaker.⁵⁷ This was the typical profile of the first groups to emigrate in the nineteenth century from northern Europe. These were men who were already struggling with the effects of industrialization but were not yet impoverished—and wanted to avoid that eventuality.⁵⁸

Once they left port, the travelers were at the mercy of the weather, and in the case of the *Quinnebaug*, the crossing was not a pleasant one. Storms caused the crossing to take fifty days, resulting in shortages of food and water. Since the voyage took a full week longer than the passengers had been instructed to prepare for, there was actual hunger during the last week as well as a shortage of drinking water. Jean Francois Maricoq, a five month old Walloon infant died, as did a Dutch boy. When the ship reached port, several passengers were too weak to walk and had to be carried from the ship.⁵⁹ In letters home, early emigrants warned prospective followers not to depend on provisions provided by the shipping company. In a letter

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵⁷ Paul and Francis Burton, *Door County Stories and Stories from the Belgian Settlement* (Ephraim, Wisconsin: Stonehill Publishing, 2003), 11.

⁵⁸ Bodnar, 52.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

from Cordellie Jacqumot, who settled near Green Bay, to her sister and brother-in-law, she advised them to “take sufficient food for the trip, some grain and a pot of butter and some tea for purging: and take some eggs and some juniper because all other liquor spoils on the sea and a bottle or two of good wine in case there is someone sick.”⁶⁰ Loius Houbrecks, a Walloon living in Kewaunee County, offered the same advice to his brother and sister. “If you set out on the voyage, don’t be afraid to take provisions along, because on the ship you’ll only have all dry food such as peas, beans and ____, and in very little amount. Also it would be better to take some wine.”⁶¹ It is interesting to note that both correspondents advise coming to Wisconsin through Quebec rather than New York. Louis Houbrecks elaborated by writing that by coming through Quebec one may bring as many trunks as desired at no additional charge but through New York one must pay extra. He also added, “In arriving in American cities, one must wait in waiting-rooms and not run to the inns because there are so many pickpockets, especially to the immigrants.”⁶²

Upon landing, immigrants had to contend with the multitude of unscrupulous people waiting to overcharge or rob them. American currency was confusing and immigrants had been warned to avoid paper money as its value fluctuated. One immigrant told of a friendly person who offered him a cup of coffee and then made him pay an enormous amount for it.⁶³ In 1855 the New York State Emigration Commission opened Castle Garden on the southern tip of Manhattan to protect them from a great deal of abuse. The new arrivals were given a cursory medical inspection, were registered, and then were free to obtain food, collect letters, change money, book accommodations at local boarding houses, buy rail and steamboat tickets to inland destinations,

⁶⁰ Letter dated February 3, 1863 from Cordellie Jacqumot to sister Josephine Jacqumot and brother-in-law Desire Lhost, “Jacqmot Family,” Vertical File, Belgian Collection, University of Wisconsin at Green Bay.

⁶¹ Letter dated February 8, 1864 from Louis Houbrecks to his sister Josephine Jacqumot, “Jacqmot Family,” Vertical File, Belgian Collection, University of Wisconsin at Green Bay.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Rentmeester, 38.

and arrange for luggage to be forwarded. In 1856 alone, 20,000 immigrants came through Castle Garden on their way to Wisconsin.⁶⁴

Unfortunately for the first Walloon immigrants, this facility was not yet in operation when they arrived in 1853. And even this government controlled facility did not guarantee fair treatment of immigrants once they set out for their ultimate destination. An article appearing in the *Green Bay Advocate* in 1856 reports the arrival of a lake steamer carrying 260 Belgians from Chicago. "These emigrants are cheated and gouged in every possible shape, on their way from N. York to this city, with perhaps, the exception of the Chicago line. We learn that Capt. Clark generously refunded them money unjustly taken by Milwaukee agents."⁶⁵

Subsequent groups of immigrants came in response to information received through a network of family and community relationships. They based their decisions on information received from previous immigrants as to where in the United States to settle, who to contact, what kind of work to expect, and how to find it. Few immigrants came without knowing where they were going and what to expect when they got there.⁶⁶ Of course, the first Walloon immigrants did not have the benefit of such information, though subsequent groups from their home region relied heavily on such information.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 41.

⁶⁵ "More Belgians," *Green Bay Advocate*, May 15, 1856.

⁶⁶ Bodnar, 57. Also see Jose C. Moya, *Cousins and Strangers: Spanish Immigrants in Buenos Aires, 1850-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) 68-80, 86-88, 96-117.

CHAPTER 2

ESTABLISHMENT OF WALLOON SETTLEMENT IN WISCONSIN

The destination chosen by the Walloons represented a major departure from the majority of immigrants coming to America. Before 1850, only a third of European immigrants chose to travel to rural destinations and after mid-century an urban location with the promise of work was the overwhelming immigrant destination. By 1890, ninety-five percent of immigrants came looking for industrial work.⁶⁷ These urban immigrants faced the challenge of creating a place for themselves in an already established culture and making the accommodations within their own cultural that would enable them to survive and support their families. Those going to rural destinations faced a minimum of pressure from outside cultures.

During the ocean voyage, the original group of Brabant Walloons became acquainted with their fellow passengers, Dutch immigrants planning to join friends and family already established in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, and the Walloons decided they would continue with them to that area, approximately sixty miles north of Milwaukee. Unlike many peasant immigrants who gravitated to urban areas seeking factory jobs but bringing no experience and therefore having to settle for the lowest wages, the Walloons had farming skills they acquired working the land in Belgium and planned to use their skills in their new homes. They came to Wisconsin to acquire and farm their own land and did not deviate from their goal, even when they learned the inland leg of their journey from New York involved an additional expenditure of 100 to 150 francs⁶⁸ and took approximately three additional weeks of travel. This added expense most likely explains why two large families, the Martins and the Paques, together totaling sixteen people, decided to go instead to Philadelphia until they could earn additional money for the trip to Wisconsin. There is no mention of the Martin family's expenditures on the Quinnebaug, but Xavier Martin writes in his account of the voyage that the Paques family spent an additional 26

⁶⁷ Harzig and Hoerder, 36.

⁶⁸ This would be the equivalent of \$600 to \$800 in 2010.

francs for food from the ship's supplies, further depleting their funds.⁶⁹ Ambroise Degodt, a weaver from Grez, had immigrated to Philadelphia with his family eight months earlier. Apparently there had been communication between Degodt and the villagers in Grez as the Martins and the Pacques knew where to find him. After working in Philadelphia for only a few months, and receiving encouraging words from the Walloons who had continued to Wisconsin, they were able to rejoin their fellow Belgians. The Degodt family relocated to Wisconsin with them. Xavier Martin however remained in Philadelphia until 1857 to learn English and the American political system.⁷⁰

The route the first group chose when leaving New York was the most economical way to reach Wisconsin and was used by many subsequent immigrants prior to the completion of the Chicago-Milwaukee Railroad in 1863. The group took the Albany-Buffalo road, crossed Lake Erie to Detroit by lake-steamer, and then took a train to St. Joseph or New Buffalo on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan. They then again boarded a lake-steamer to cross Lake Michigan to Milwaukee.⁷¹ In the 1850s, Green Bay was a major port, with several sailing vessels and steam powered boats arriving and departing daily. In 1853 the *Green Bay Advocate* carried the May to November schedule for weekly trips between Buffalo and Green Bay as well as travel between Chicago and Green Bay.⁷² However, the Walloons, perhaps in consideration of their dwindling finances, travelled the last fifty-nine miles to the Sheboygan area on foot, carrying their small children and dragging their baggage behind them. Unfortunately, once they reached Sheboygan they found the good land already claimed by Dutch settlers and only inferior land still available. They were also frustrated by the fact that they had difficulty communicating with the Dutch, not knowing their language. While the Walloons were trying to decide their next step they met a French Canadian trapper who assured

⁶⁹ Xavier Martin, "The Belgians of North East Wisconsin," *Journal of Wisconsin Historical Collection* 31 (1895), <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/whc/id/6128/show/5980/rec/3> [accessed February 7, 2013] 380.

⁷⁰ Martin, 380, Defnet, et. al., 20-21.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁷² *Green Bay Advocate*, August 25, 1853.

them that in the Green Bay area, fifty-six miles farther north, they would find equally fertile soil, a similar climate, and a large population of French-speaking settlers. In mid-August, the group once again started out.⁷³

When they reached Green Bay they found that, just as the French trapper predicted, they had no trouble finding settlers with whom they could communicate in French. Temporarily settling their families in Green Bay, the men set out to find suitable land to purchase. After several days they decided on an area along the Fox River, about twenty miles south of Green Bay, and going to the government land office for that area, paid deposits on their claims.⁷⁴ However, upon returning to Green Bay for their families and belongings, they learned that one of the children of Philippe Hannon, probably Marie Barbe who was born in Grez Doiceau in 1852 and was the youngest, had died. The departure to their newly claimed land was delayed until the child could be buried. The ceremony took place at St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church in Green Bay with the French priest Father Perrod officiating.⁷⁵ The immigrants had no church of their own, were comfortable with the Catholic burial service, and placed great importance on the service being in French.⁷⁶ It is also possible that after spending their lives embracing the importance of being buried in consecrated land, they wanted this for the dead child.

It happened that the Belgian missionary Father Edouard Daems, who was in charge of the Bay Settlement parish approximately fifteen miles northeast of Green Bay, was visiting Father Perrod at this same time and after exchanging news and advice, persuaded the group of Walloons to forfeit their deposits on the land south of Green Bay and settle instead in the area where he was building his church. The land they chose lay ten miles northeast of the mission, deep into virgin forest of hickory, maple, ash, beech, cedar, birch, and pine. In the entire area, there were no other dwellings. With the help of a surveyor, the original group chose land that

⁷³ Defnet, et. al., 21-22, Tlachac, 9.

⁷⁴ deSmet, 12.

⁷⁵ deSmet, 12, Defnet, et. al., 22.

⁷⁶ Judith Carlsen, "Amazing Grace" *Voyageur; Historical Review of Brown County and Northeast Wisconsin* 28, no. 1 (Summer/Fall, 2011): 37.

turned out to be three sections in Township 24 and three sections in Township 25. The six contiguous sections of land extended to the county lines of Brown and Kewaunee Counties.⁷⁷ Of course, there were no roads, or even trails, and the men had to devise ways to find their land when they returned with their families. One method was to strip bark off of trees to mark the “trail” leading to their destination. They then returned to Bay Settlement where they met a civil servant who allocated the selected acreage by writing down the names of those who paid the registration fee.

They named their first settlement Aux Premiers Belges (The First Belgians).⁷⁸ By 1858, settlement by subsequent Walloon immigrants reached a sufficient level that Township 26 was established as the Township of Brussels, and southern Door County became part of the Belgian community as well.⁷⁹ In Wisconsin, a Township is a surveyed area six miles by six miles, with the exterior boundaries running due east-west and north-south. The 36 square miles within a township were then surveyed and divided into 36 sections, each being one mile square or 160 acres. A Township eventually contained several towns or villages, although in the Belgian settlement area these were usually unincorporated.

But what of the Native Americans that once occupied this land? In 1830 President Jackson had signed into law the Indian Removal Act designed to relocate Native Americans living east of the Mississippi to lands west of the river. At that time, in the area eventually settled by the Walloons, there were Menominee, Ojibwa, and Potawatomi villages, but with the end of the Black Hawk War in 1832, the United States military firmly established its supremacy in the area west of the Great Lakes. By 1836, the Native Americans of northeast Wisconsin had ceded their lands and left the Belgian settlement area. This occurred almost twenty years before the immigrants arrived.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ deSmet, 13.

⁷⁸ Holand, 200.

⁷⁹ deSmet, 13.

⁸⁰ Helen Hornbeck Tanner, ed., *Atlas of Great Lakes Indian History* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987) 156.

Although the Indians had officially been removed, there were isolated Indian populations remaining and the Walloons reported some contact with them. As late as 1851, Simon Kahquados, last known Chief of the Wisconsin Potawatomi, was born in Kewaunee County.⁸¹ In a letter to his brother, Charles Louis Desmedt wrote,

These savages are still here, but they are not like they are depicted. They are modest, kind-hearted and civilized, and they invent works of art. When one meets them, they always travel in groups. They greet you, smile and continue on their way without making the slightest noise. They are smart people; many know French and tell stories more than 300 years old.⁸²

Other Walloons related similar experiences. The settlers found the Potawatomi Indians to be friendly and, by smiles and gestures, they assured each other of their cordial feelings.⁸³ Another immigrant, Constant Delveaux, described the “savages” as honest because “they would leave their guns at the door before entering our homes” and “ask us for food by pointing to their mouths.”⁸⁴ As the Walloons had chosen to settle in such an isolated location, the Native Americans were the only other human contact they had for quite some time—in some cases, two or three years. It was the Native Americans who taught them to trap wild animals and to smoke the meat to preserve it. They also taught the immigrants to tap maple trees and make sugar from the sap. Ice fishing during the winter months was another new survival skill which the Belgians learned from the remaining Indians.

There was also communication and cooperation between the women of the two groups; they are known to have engaged in blackberry picking and then, making the long walk to Green

⁸¹ Forest County Potawatomi, <http://www.fcpotawatomi.com/> [accessed January 21, 2013].

⁸² Goris, 278-279.

⁸³ Tlachac, 12.

⁸⁴ Lempereur, 66.

Bay, selling their berries together.⁸⁵ If any movement toward acculturation was done by the Walloon immigrants, a case might be made that it was to the Native American culture rather than to the “Anglo-American core.”

Upon reaching their newly purchased land in the fall of 1853, the first task was to erect some sort of shelter—usually not more than a hut or a lean-to that provided very little protection. Considering the severity of the Wisconsin winters and the abundance of wild animals in the area, they soon realized they would need something more substantial and replaced these first shelters with logs cabins with roofs of cedar bark or later, shingles. There were no nails or hardware of any kind used in the construction and, leather strips often served as hinges. Openings between the logs were chinked with clay mud and the floor, if there was one, was made of split logs.⁸⁶ They survived that first winter mainly by hunting, trapping, and fishing and spent their days clearing what land they could, often contending with trees five or six feet in diameter. Once they felled a tree, they had no way to move it and so had to burn it where it fell. In the spring, after planting their little cleared patches of land, it was necessary for the men to walk to Green Bay, Milwaukee, or even Chicago seeking work. For weeks and sometimes months at a time the women and children were left to tend their little farms, contend with loneliness, and stave off the terror brought on by hearing wolves, bears, and other wild animals prowling around their cabins at night.

Emigration to Wisconsin continued in 1854—probably before the promised letters from the first group began arriving in Grez. When they did arrive, the letters were read and reread, passed around from village to village, and some published in the newspapers. Historian Dirk Hoerder writes that even when immigrants had reliable information about several destinations, they preferred destinations where relatives or friends already lived.⁸⁷ Considering the continuing immigration came primarily from the eastern part of Brabant (the cantons Jodoigne,

⁸⁵ “Blackberries,” *Green Bay Advocate*, September 2, 1858.

⁸⁶ Tlachac, 16.

⁸⁷ Dirk Hoerder, “Immigration to Migration Systems: New Concepts in Migration History,” *OAH Magazine of History* 14, no. 1, Migrations (Fall, 1999): 6.

Perwez, and Wavre) and the Namur region of Hesbaye (the cantons of Eghezee and Gemblous), both relatively small regions located in the south central part of Belgium, it is likely the emigrants knew each other or at least knew of one another's families. Undoubtedly this contributed to their decisions to settle in close proximity to each other in Wisconsin which, in turn, contributed to the cohesiveness of the group. It is estimated that from 1853 to 1857, between 5,000 and 7,500 emigrants left this area of Belgium for America.⁸⁸ Other estimates are much higher. Xavier Martin, in his account, stated that when he arrived in Wisconsin in 1857 there were 15,000 Belgians living there.⁸⁹ However, the next year the Green Bay Advocate reported a rural Belgian population living in the area between Bay Settlement and Sturgeon Bay of 10,000, which is probably more accurate.⁹⁰

It was also in 1854 that cholera, most likely brought by recent immigrants to America, grew to epidemic proportions. First appearing in Milwaukee during the summer of 1849, the disease spread north along the Lake Michigan coast and had devastating results among the newly settled Belgians of Door, Brown, and Kewaunee Counties, where it struck nearly every family.⁹¹ At that time both the cause and treatment for cholera were unknown. Even if there had been a treatment, the Belgians were far too isolated to obtain medical help as, once stricken, the victim usually died within a few days, sometimes a few hours. "Not a few families lost as many as five of their members in a single week; most of them were buried on their own land, and in great haste."⁹²

No doubt, when news of the cholera epidemic reached Belgium, some potential emigrants decided against going to America. However, there is reason to believe the wealthy

⁸⁸ *Wisconsin French Connections*, "1852: Emigration of the Farmers from Brabant and Hesbaye," reprinted with permission from a brochure of the Ministere de la Region Wallone, Brussels, Belgium. <http://www.uwgb.edu/wisfrench/library/history/belges/wibelges.htm> [accessed February 8, 2013].

⁸⁹ Martin, 379.

⁹⁰ "Something Which Is Needed," *Green Bay Advocate*, March 4, 1858.

⁹¹ Peter T. Harstad, "Disease and Sickness on the Wisconsin Frontier: Cholera," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Spring, 1960, 216.

⁹² Martin, 379-380.

shipping interests in Antwerp were able to keep the reports secret, at least through 1856.⁹³ Apparently most Belgians either did not know of the epidemic or were not dissuaded, and thousands departed for Wisconsin. Between 1855 and 1856, emigration continued at a rate sufficient to cause local Belgian authorities to become concerned about the “disastrous depopulation” which was causing a drop in land prices and an increase in wages due to shortages of workers.⁹⁴ Some inhabitants of Brabant addressed a petition to the Belgian government dated February 27, 1856, asking authorities to take measures to stop the emigration.⁹⁵ Letters home, while not portraying America as a “promised land,” did give a positive report of conditions. Possible tendencies by an immigrant to exaggerate his success would have been controlled by the knowledge that there existed the very real possibility that the recipient would soon appear as the author’s neighbor. In an 1855 letter to his mother, Charles Lhost, who left Grez-Doiceau in April of that year, writes that after working in the state only a month and a half he has been able to “buy a quarter of land” and that “my house is already built.” He goes on to assure her “Right now my health is good; for him who has money to live for a year in America, he has his fortune made.” In closing he reassures her, “I will have my land cleared here in 3 or 4 years.”⁹⁶

Not all Walloon immigrants fared this well. The winter of 1855-1856 was particularly harsh and the *Green Bay Advocate* reported on the sufferings of the Belgians who settled north of Green Bay. Local citizens donated food but the men who volunteered to distribute the supplies reported the settlers’ huts were “entirely unfit to protect them from the cold, ...so that besides the horrors of starvation they have to face the danger of death by freezing. Many of the men had already frozen their hands and feet.”⁹⁷ In July of 1855 M. John C. Perrodin, a Belgian priest living and working near the area of Belgian settlement, wrote in response to a request

⁹³ deSmet, 24.

⁹⁴ Defnet, et. al., 26.

⁹⁵ deSmet, 24.

⁹⁶ Letter dated October 1, 1855 from Charles Lhost to his mother, “Lhost Family,” Vertical File, Belgian Collection, University of Wisconsin at Green Bay.

⁹⁷ “Suffering Among the Belgians,” *Green Bay Advocate*, January 17, 1856.

from a priest in Wallonia on the condition of his former parishioners. M. Perrodin writes that it will be easier for the groups just arriving as the ones who came earlier will help them “to acquire land and to maintain their health.” However, he goes on to warn “you must not think that we can find farms in United States that are cultivated or near cities or villages. You have to go a long distance in the middle of a big forest, where there is no church, nor school, to enjoy the privilege of cheap lands. You must open roads, cut down the trees, burn it and clear the land before getting a harvest.” Later in the letter he emphasizes the effort required to succeed in Wisconsin. “The New World is not paradise, no more than the Old World. Those that, and those that don’t like to work, is badly mistaken if he thinks that we find fortunes all made here.”⁹⁸

In 1856, the Belgian newspaper *Les Petites Affiches* published parts of two letters from Wisconsin, one from M. Perrodin. He wrote:

There are more than 2,000 Belgians in the area now. While the first of them had some money, they could buy pretty good soil; but they who arrived last autumn have a lack of everything. Many died of cold, hunger, and homesickness. A great number of them had their hands and feet frozen. If they are sick they have no doctor; even if they have a doctor, they cannot understand him; if they are searching a job, they cannot find some, because they don’t understand the language of the country, which is English.⁹⁹

However, the information did not discourage those in Wallonia who had made the decision to emigrate. Through the spring of 1856, several issues of the *Green Bay Advocate* published announcements of more Belgians arriving. On May 8, 1856, the paper reported that two ships, the *Cleveland* and the *Huron*, arrived with “immense loads of passengers. The

⁹⁸ Letter dated July 5, 1855 from John C. Perrodin to Charles Vanerum, “Correspondence—U.S. to Belgium,” Vertical File, Belgian Collection, University of Wisconsin at Green Bay.

⁹⁹ “Poverty in America,” *Les Petites Affiches de Jodoigne*, undated newspaper article, “Les Petites Affiches,” Vertical File, Belgian Collection, University of Wisconsin at Green Bay.

Cleveland brought about 175 Belgians and the Huron about 240. This makes about 900 Belgians who have arrived in our city so far this spring, by land and water, and we learn that there are from 3,000 to 4,000 on the way here.”¹⁰⁰ Indicating no prejudice against the new arrivals, the article is quite positive, stating, “They are as strong and healthy looking emigrants as we have seen in years, and we learn that the greater part of them have abundant means to maintain them while ‘opening up’ their farms.”¹⁰¹ The next issue, published one week later, reports “the steamer Cleveland arrived again from Chicago, this time carrying 260 more Belgians.”¹⁰²

The next year, 1857, was the high point of the Belgian emigration and the *Green Bay Advocate* continued to report their progress in glowing terms. One article, reprinted in the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, acknowledged most citizens were accustomed to regarding the area of Belgian settlement as unbroken wilderness, but went on to say they “would be astonished to see the change which has been wrought within a year or two.” After making reference to the many houses appearing among the trees along the Green Bay shore, the article reports that further inland there is a constant succession of substantial farms of from five to forty acres, with excellent crops growing, and points out that Green Bay will benefit from the produce brought to market.¹⁰³ The Walloon settlement extended along the eastern shore of Green Bay from Bay Settlement north to Sturgeon Bay.

Beginning with the first group in 1853 and not coming to an end until 1857, the flow of Belgian immigrants continued and the *Green Bay Advocate* continued its complimentary descriptions. Reporting on a group of fifty Belgians arriving on the steamer, Louisiana, the paper states, “They are a fine, healthy looking party of immigrants and appear to have the strength and energy to subdue the forest and make it blossom.” Two weeks later, reporting

¹⁰⁰ “Chicago Steamers,” *Green Bay Advocate*, May 8, 1856.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² “More Belgians,” *Green Bay Advocate*, May 15, 1856.

¹⁰³ “The Belgian Settlement,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, August 12, 1857.

again on the Huron, the paper states there were “sixty Belgians who we are informed will settle in the northern part of our county. Many more are on the way. Success to them!”¹⁰⁴

Emigrant letters show a deep need to communicate with their home villages and maintain the ties to family and friends still in Wallonia. In his October 1, 1855 letter to his mother in Belgium Charles Lhost writes, “I am writing to you, dear Mother, for the third time but I have not yet received any news from you. I am patiently waiting for your answer as soon as possible.” After assuring her of his good health and his success in buying a farm he returns to his original subject. “I would like very much to know how you are dear Mother, and brother and sister; give my greetings to my aunt and my uncle Blagelot and to my cousins. I hug you all.”¹⁰⁵ He then includes greetings from several other settlers to their family members still in Belgium. In another letter dated approximately eighteen months later, he again pleads for news, “...dear brother and dear mother don’t forget then to write to me and let me know how everything is with the whole family and to tell me all the news of the village and of all our old country. Dear brother, someone told me that Lambert Pyters, my brother-in-law, was no longer in Grez; have the goodness to tell me what has become of him.” Again he includes communication from other immigrants writing, “Antoinette Lose asks if it is true that her father has died, what has become of her mother, who stays in the house and how all the family is behaving.” He then pleads again, “Dear brother, don’t forget to write to me as soon as possible. Dear brother, I send my greetings to the whole family and especially to my dear mama and my whole family does as much.”¹⁰⁶

A letter from Cordellie Jacqmot to her “Dearest Father” wishes him a happy new year, also “making the same wishes to my sister and to the whole family.” That previous letters have been exchanged is evident when she continues by saying,

¹⁰⁴ Lee W. Metzner, “The Belgians in the North Country,” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, March, 1943, 286-287.

¹⁰⁵ Letter dated October 1, 1855 from Charles Lhost to his mother, “Lhost Family.”

¹⁰⁶ Letter dated May 1, 1857 from Charles Lhost to his brother, “Lhost Family.”

Dear sister, I pray to God every day that He'll give me the grace that you have had
In your bed to be so happily delivered and that you have been so soon in good
health. If only God would grant me the same grace. Dear Papa, have
patience...¹⁰⁷

While there is no indication that the immigrants entertained any thoughts of ever returning to Wallonia, they maintained close ties to their loved ones left behind.

Worth noting is that in the available correspondence, there is no inquiry regarding the country of Belgium or the political climate in their former home. It is unlikely that the Walloons even thought of themselves as "Belgian," for two reasons. First, the country they left was divided into two distinct regions: the Flemish north, speaking a Germanized Dutch, and the Walloon south, where a French dialect is spoken. It is doubtful the emigrants had developed a conviction of their home country being the nation of Belgium. Second, as primarily illiterate rural inhabitants, they would strongly identify with their home villages and the networks of family and friends of which they had once been a part, rather than the nation of Belgium. Their letters are filled with inquiries relating to those people and news of the villages. There is no indication that their self identity involved nationalist feelings for Belgium, which was a newly created political entity.

At the height of Walloon immigration in 1857, the United States suffered an economic depression triggered by the failure of the Ohio Life Insurance and Trust Company. Telegraph lines quickly spread the news that investors had lost all their money leaving many destitute, and worried investors nationwide began withdrawing their funds from other companies. The result was the failure of numerous businesses nationwide.¹⁰⁸ The Walloon settlers, who depended on the wages earned in Green Bay and Milwaukee during the winter months, had to find some

¹⁰⁷ Letter dated December 30, 1856 from Cordellie Jacqmot to her father, "Jacqmot Family."

¹⁰⁸ Ohio Historical Society, "Panic of 1857," Ohio Historical Society, <http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/entry.php?rec=537> [accessed June 17, 2012].

other means to support their families. The pine trees surrounding their cabins were valuable, with pine selling for \$1.50 a thousand board feet,¹⁰⁹ but they had no way of getting felled trees to saw mills. However, someone thought of making shingles from the cut trees and the idea quickly caught on. This was an enterprise in which every family member could participate and soon, reinforced by their already existing familiarity with cottage industries from their experience in Wallonia, every hut became a shingle-making business. The men, usually accompanied by their wives, went into the surrounding forest and felled trees which they then cut into eighteen inch logs called bolts. The children split the bolts and, joined by the older Belgians, eventually arrived at the finished shingle which measured eighteen inches long by six inches wide by a half inch thick. These were then tied into bundles of 250 shingles and carried the several miles to the Bay shore where once a week a schooner would pick them up and take them to Green Bay where shingles were selling for \$1.50 per thousand.¹¹⁰ Eventually, every Belgian settler was involved in shingle-making. Family participation in a cottage industry was an activity they would have been comfortable with. In 1860, more than four million handmade shingles were shipped out of Brussels, Wisconsin. The Civil War caused a decline in shingle making in the United States but by 1870, J. B. A. Masse, Belgian Consul in Chicago, reported twenty million handmade shingles, valued at seventy-five thousand dollars, had sold in Green Bay the previous year.¹¹¹

The isolation of the Walloon settlement significantly impacted and reinforced the lack of acculturation by this ethnic group. In the dense wilderness where they settled, there was no dominant culture to assimilate into and no pressure from outside sources to encourage any changes. In addition to the Walloons, Northeastern Wisconsin was settled by Germans, Dutch, Bohemian, Polish, Irish, English, Scotch, and Scandinavians during the middle of the nineteenth

¹⁰⁹ Tlachac, 18.

¹¹⁰ Holand, 201-202, Lempereur, 78, Tlachac, 18.

¹¹¹ J. B. A. Masse, 3.

century.¹¹² But the Walloons, laboring in the wilderness to establish their homes and farms, had no contact with these other ethnic groups. During the short period that Walloon immigration continued, newcomers were almost universally relatives or friends of the Belgian families who had already immigrated, reinforcing the Walloon culture and the community's cohesiveness. With rare exceptions, such as when marketing their shingles, during these first four years the settlers were essentially shut off from contact with the outside world by the lack even of trails through the dense virgin forest surrounding them, as well as by their absorption in their struggle to establish a new life.

The immigration rate dropped dramatically after 1857, although a small number of immigrants continued to join the settlement through the end of the nineteenth century. The Belgian government, responding to falling land values and increasing wage demands, had implemented emigration restrictions. These governmental actions, along with discouraging letters from some of the previous emigrants, brought the movement to an end after less than four years.¹¹³

Notwithstanding the diminishing immigration, one particular newcomer, Xavier Martin, had significant influence on the development of the community after arriving in 1857. Martin, the young man who had been part of the first group emigrating from Grez but had stayed behind in Philadelphia, came to Wisconsin to visit his family. He was the only person in the entire three county Belgian community, now numbering an estimated 15,000 Walloons according to him, who possessed knowledge of English and American politics and, subjected to pressure from the other settlers, agreed to stay. In his memoirs Martin describes an active, industrious settlement with people clearing land, making shingles, bringing in the harvest, and generally making progress. In the three to four years they had been in Wisconsin, several had been able to

¹¹² Anton Jarstad, "Melting Pot in Northeastern Wisconsin," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, June, 1943, 427. In addition a prevailing idea among early immigration historians was that immigrants from different countries of origin were unable to communicate due to language barriers. However, further study in the 1980s dispelled this idea citing contact in the marketplace, mixed settlement patterns, and mixed contact at the workplace which fostered multilingualism. See Dirk Hoerder, "The Transplanted': International Dimensions," *Social Science History* 12, no. 3 (Autumn, 1988) 257.

¹¹³ William G. Laatsch and Charles F. Calkins, "Belgians in Wisconsin," in *To Build In a New Land: Ethnic Landscapes in North America*, ed. Allen G. Noble (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 195.

purchase cattle and others were raising pigs. Martin writes that the Walloons had accomplished all this progress by relying entirely on their own efforts. “The Belgians had not been able to obtain any help, either for the building of churches or schools or teachers—not even help for opening highways leading to their settlements.”¹¹⁴

By this time, almost all adult, white males in the United States had the right to vote. All that was required was that he be a white male at least 21 years of age. After one year’s residency and the declaration of intent to become a citizen, a European immigrant could vote. The Walloons most likely did not know about their right to vote and certainly did not know how to exercise this right. In Belgium only five percent of the population had the right to suffrage and these former peasants had no experience voting.¹¹⁵ Xavier Martin explained to the immigrants how to apply for citizenship, how the American system of local government operated, and how powerful their vote could be. Within a year, the men of the Belgian community participated in their first election. In 1858 the remote and isolated Walloon community lay largely forgotten by most of the inhabitants of Bay Settlement, the mission founded by Father Deams, where the election box was located. The mission was several miles southwest of the Belgian settlement area and other voters were shocked when they saw two hundred and thirty Belgian voters marching in double file from their remote farms, most more than ten miles away. They all carried ballots printed especially for them and the entire slate of Belgian candidates on those ballots was elected.¹¹⁶ Historian Kathleen Neils Conzen states that “political participation marked a relatively late stage in the accommodation process.”¹¹⁷ Obviously this was not the situation in the Walloon community which essentially had not begun the acculturation process—another example of the distinctiveness of the Walloons. For them voting was not a sign of a desire to assimilate, but rather a way to have their need for roads and schools met. These

¹¹⁴ X. Martin, 383.

¹¹⁵ Holand, 199.

¹¹⁶ X. Martin, 383.

¹¹⁷ Kathleen Neils Conzen, *Immigrant Milwaukee 1836-1860. Accommodation and Community in a Frontier City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 192-193.

settlers were politically “Americanized” when they saw a reason to be, but then returned to their rural Walloon culture with which they were so satisfied.

After the election the settlers organized themselves into localities according to the laws of the state of Wisconsin and chose for themselves Justices of the Peace and other needed municipal officials. All of these local officials were chosen from within the Belgian community. Martin accepted the offices of Justice of the Peace, Town Clerk, and School Superintendent for Robinsonville. The latter position is interesting in light of the fact that no schools yet existed, but apparently the settlers were optimistic that the situation would improve.

The Walloons had no history of privately supported parochial schools, as in Belgium the government bore the cost of building and maintaining schools through tax revenue and, as Belgium was an overwhelmingly Catholic country, education included instruction in the Catholic faith. Since its inception in 1848, the state of Wisconsin stipulated that section 16 of each Township was allocated for public schools. The people of the Township could use the land for a school or, more likely, sell the section and use the proceeds to build schools closer to the population concentrations.¹¹⁸ For example, the Township of Brussels contained the villages of Brussels, Union, and Gardner, located many miles apart, and eventually each needed a school. The State of Wisconsin, since its inception 1848, had provided a designated section of land in each township, the sale of which was to be used for school purposes. There was a system in place to provide local tax revenue for the maintenance of the schools, although private funding was often needed to supplement the public revenue. Unlike the immigrants who settled in urban areas, the Walloons had no way to know about the state’s provision or how to access the funds, but Xavier Martin had learned about the provision and, as newly elected Superintendent of Schools, was in a position to implement them.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Wisconsin Mosaic, “A Brief History of Wisconsin,” The Wisconsin Mosaic, <http://comminfo.rutgers.edu/~dalbello/FLVA/background/education.html> [accessed February 1, 2013].

¹¹⁹ WI Mosaic

Although the first Walloon schools were usually convened in someone's home, by the end of the nineteenth century, the Townships of Brussels, Union, and Gardner, all in southern Door County, contained fourteen schools, only one of which was the parochial school connected to St. Mary's Church in Union.¹²⁰ However, as the settlement area was almost one hundred percent Catholic, and the Walloons were living in a remote and isolated area where they were accustomed to making their own decisions as to how activities would be conducted, it would be safe to assume there was some amount of religious education involved in the public school curriculum. The Walloons were deeply religious and the instruction of the Catholic faith to their children was very important.¹²¹

School attendance was sporadic and the schedule was arranged around the need for the students' labor on their families' farms. A large percentage of the Walloon immigrants were illiterate and, even though they wanted their children to have access to an education, the needs of the family would always come first. Supporting this attitude was the belief that the success of the next generation would be determined, not by their ability to read and write, but by their skill in farming as taught to them by their parents. Inadequate school houses, poor teachers, the long distances some students had to travel, bad roads (and in some cases total lack of roads), and severe winter weather were additional reasons for lack of attendance. At the Annual School Meeting of Door County in 1873, the decision was made to conduct school five months of the year, beginning "sometime in May, 1874," when the first three months would be offered, and completing the remaining two months "in the fall."¹²² The lack of specific beginning and ending dates probably indicates a casual attitude toward attendance. These school officials would have been part of the farming community and, as such, understood the need for the labor of the children on the family farms. The first compulsory attendance law was not passed in the

¹²⁰ Gerry Strey, *Land Ownership Maps and Atlases of Wisconsin: 1836-1960*, (Madison, Wisconsin: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1995).

¹²¹ Holmes, 165.

¹²² State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Door County, Rural School District Records, Door County, Series 37, Vol. 1, University of Wisconsin at Green Bay, Archives.

state until 1879 and was difficult to enforce as enforcement was left to local officials.¹²³ An ongoing challenge for school officials was the job of finding teachers willing to come to isolated one room schools. These were difficult circumstances offering poor pay and uncertain periods of employment.

Throughout the state, there was growing concern regarding the strength of ethnic enclaves maintaining foreign languages and cultures. The issue came to a head in the debate over state regulation of public and private schools, and to what extent the schools would be used to assimilate school age children. In 1889, the Republican-controlled state government passed the Bennett Law requiring school attendance for twelve weeks a year and that certain courses be taught in English.¹²⁴ Bitter opposition to the bill occurred primarily in the eastern part of the state, where the highest number of ethnic groups was found. A coalition of Catholics and Lutherans, who saw the bill as an assault on their system of parochial schools, and German immigrants, who in 1890 constituted more than one-third of the population of the state, overwhelmingly supported Democratic candidates. As a result, the Wisconsin Republican Party suffered its worst defeat until 1932. The Governor and most of the Republican State Representatives were voted out of office and the Bennett Law was repealed the next year.¹²⁵

Within the Belgian settlement however there was not a strong reaction against the Bennett Law. The Belgians were the only Catholic ethnic group in the state who historically voted Republican, and the majority did so again in this election. But there was a split in their vote. In Red River, Kewaunee County, the Republican margin fell from seventy-nine to sixty-six percent. In four other Belgian towns the Republican vote dropped between eighteen and thirty-four percent.¹²⁶ Possibly a greater defection was avoided by the Belgians' intention to continue their practice of ignoring compulsory attendance laws and sending their children to school only when their labor was not required on the family farm. Possibly the historic Belgian lack of

¹²³ WI Mosaic.

¹²⁴ WI Mosaic, 1.

¹²⁵ Roger E. Wyman, "Wisconsin Ethnic Groups and the Election of 1890," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Summer, 1986, 269.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 288.

support for parochial schools kept them from being more affected by the argument that the bill was an attack on parochial schools.

An inspection of the U.S. Census of 1899 shows that among the 561 respondents for the Township of Brussels, of the 380 claiming to be able to read (in any language) and 377 claiming to be able to write (again, in any language), only 127 stated they had ever been to school.¹²⁷ This would indicate that the majority who claimed literacy had been taught at home, probably in French, by a family member or neighbor.

This would also explain why, according to that same census, roughly one-third stated they spoke no English. Those who spoke English had been forced to learn it in school and still spoke Walloon away from their teachers. By this time, the Walloons had been in Wisconsin nearly a half century and, in many cases, represented the third generation. A letter written in 1864 by Louis Houbrecks of Kewaunee County to his brother in Wallonia addresses the question of what the brother could do if he were to immigrate to Wisconsin. Houbreck responds that his brother could not do anything but farm, as he did not know English.¹²⁸ This reveals two interesting underlying concepts. First, if one were to farm in the Belgian settlement area, there was no need for English, reemphasizing that everyone there continued to speak Walloon. Also interesting is that Houbreck did not offer the idea of his brother attempting to learn English. Contributing to the lack of interest in learning English was the fact that the members of the settlement not only spoke the same language but, coming from the same region in south central Belgium, they all spoke the same dialect, called "Namurois" by linguists.¹²⁹ This common language was an important element for maintaining the ethnicity and cohesion of the settlement.

Martin also helped establish Robinsonville's first post office and became Postmaster. The person holding this position usually discharged his duties from his home by picking up the mail for his area from the appropriate post office and distributing it to the families in his area.

¹²⁷ U. S. Bureau of Census, 1899, Door County, Brussels Township, Brown County Library, Green Bay, Wisconsin.

¹²⁸ Letter dated February 8, 1864 from Louis Houbrecks to his brother, "Jacqmot Family."

¹²⁹ Fred L. Holmes, *Old World Wisconsin: Around Europe in the Badger State* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin: E.M. Hale and Company, 1944), 166.

Most families received a monthly newspaper from Belgium and an occasional letter.¹³⁰ In 1862, Martin was elected Register of Deeds for Brown County and, as such, was compelled to relocate to Green Bay. During the five years he lived in the Walloon settlement, his efforts did a great deal to improve conditions for the communities there and the period seems to represent something of a turning point for the settlers. The original huts were replaced by substantial cabins and agricultural efforts were so successful that large barns were required to store the surplus. By the fall of 1859, Xavier Martin had a school building in which to hold classes, two taverns were in operation, and the settlement had its first store.¹³¹ However, it is important to remember that in no way did the improving conditions dilute the cohesiveness of the Belgian community. In fact, the contrary is the case. Establishments such as taverns and stores served an important social function, providing a place where the immigrants could see their friends and family members, exchange news and gossip, and continually strengthen ties within the group.¹³²

Their deep spirituality and devotion to Catholicism provided another important cohesive factor. Overwhelmingly Catholic, they held the same beliefs, practiced the same rituals, and together, longed for churches in which to worship and priests to lead them. As Father Deams, the Belgian missionary who originally convinced the settlers to come to northeast Wisconsin, had a large area for which he was responsible, he was not able to minister to their needs on a regular basis. Many settlers walked the ten or more miles into Bay Settlement weekly so that they might participate in the service there. Others worshipped together in each others' cabins, with one of the laymen conducting the service when no priest was available. In an 1855 letter to Catholic officials in Belgium, Father John Perrodin, the missionary who replaced Father Deams, reported having given communion to sixty-five people at the home of Philippe Hannon from Grez.¹³³ Hannon was one of the original emigrants from that village and, at the time of his departure from Grez, had left the Catholic Church and joined the Christian Missionary Church of

¹³⁰ "Bosman Family,"

¹³¹ "Belgians Prospering," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, September 23, 1859, reprint of article from *Green Bay Advocate*.

¹³² John H. Kolb, *Emerging Rural Communities: Group Relations in Rural Society, A Review of Wisconsin Research in Action* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1959), 58-61.

¹³³ Perrodin, 3.

Belgium, a Protestant movement. It is interesting to speculate as to why he hosted the Catholic priest and congregants for the communion service. Recall that it was the Hannon family who lost a child in Green Bay soon after the group's arrival. The child was buried at a Catholic church in Green Bay. It is possible that this was the only established denomination with an ordained clergy in the area and, after leaving Green Bay and establishing their farm, the Hannon family continued their return to Catholicism. Another explanation might be that membership in a church community was so essential to immigrant Belgians, that the specifics of the ritual and dogma were secondary. Their experience of church participation was essentially an extension of family and local community, and therefore had less to do with the doctrines distant church officials endorsed.

Later in this letter, Father Perrodin went on to complain that in the United States the government has nothing to do with religion. Apparently this was such an unusual concept for Belgians that he reemphasizes the situation. "I've received nothing from the government. Everything must be done by individual subscription."¹³⁴ Although a departure from what they were accustomed to, the Walloons seem to have accepted the fact that if they were to have churches in which to worship, they would have to build them. Within a few years, as settlers contributed land, building supplies, and labor, churches appeared throughout the settlement area.

The circumstances leading to the construction of the first chapel were quite unusual. In 1859 a young Belgian girl named Adele Brice reported seeing a series of three visions of the Holy Virgin, all at the same place in the wilderness. The Brice family lived about eight miles from Bay Settlement and Adele reported seeing the first vision as she was carrying wheat through the forest to the grist mill at Robinsonville. She reported two more appearances of the Holy Virgin, these occurring as she was walking to mass in Bay Settlement, the subsequent visions occurring in exactly the same spot as the first. Adele stated the vision commissioned her

¹³⁴ Perrodin, 3.

to teach the Catholic faith to the children of the settlement, which she did for the rest of her life. Of course, there were those among the Walloons who did not believe Adele's story, but most saw the vision as a sign that their settlement efforts were blessed by God. Among the believers was Adele's father, who built a small chapel in the forest where the vision appeared to his daughter. As news traveled many immigrants visited the chapel and by 1861 the original structure was replaced by a larger chapel. Particularly on August 15, Assumption Day, thousands of Belgian settlers made the trip to the site. Adele's account gained credibility when the great fire of 1871, which burned everything for miles around, spared the chapel. It was estimated that on Assumption Day 1879, there were a thousand horse drawn wagons on the chapel grounds.¹³⁵

In 1860 settlers living in the Namur area of southern Door County constructed a small log church on three acres of donated land. They named the church St. Mary of the Snows and it became the first officially recognized Catholic Church in the Walloon settlement area, although it was considered a mission church, meaning there was not a full-time priest assigned to it. There existed a scarcity of French-speaking priests in northeastern Wisconsin at that time, and the congregation was served intermittently by traveling Holy Cross Fathers. The structure was destroyed by the great fire of 1871 but within three years the parishioners replaced the original church with a much larger frame structure that seated one hundred families. They also built a brick rectory, perhaps hoping this would entice a priest to relocate there. Unfortunately, in 1892 the church, along with a one-room school house they had built, was completely destroyed by fire, but within a year the determined settlers had constructed yet another church and, a year later, finally were assigned a priest.¹³⁶

By 1865, the settlers in the Brussels area constructed the first Catholic church for that Township, naming it St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church. The timing is somewhat surprising considering the area was still feeling the effects of the Civil War. This church, too, was

¹³⁵ Tilac, 26-29, Holand, 202-205, Burton, 58-64.

¹³⁶ Burton, 48-51.

destroyed in the great fire of 1871. When rebuilding the congregants could not agree on a site, some favoring a location to the north end of the township and others the south end. Consequently, two churches were built, St. Hubert's and St. Michael's, one in each location.¹³⁷ The Brussels church was closely followed in 1866 by St. John the Baptist Catholic Church constructed in Gardner Township, again on donated land.¹³⁸ The cemetery of St. John's has a particularly interesting history. Land was donated for a cemetery and the thirty by sixty foot plot was appropriately consecrated by a priest who traveled there for that purpose. However, when the first burial was attempted, the parishioners discovered that under only a few inches of top soil was solid rock. Feeling that they should use the site for the intended purpose, the settlers dragged rocks from the surrounding fields and enclosed the area to a height of four feet. They then hauled enough dirt to fill the enclosure and used their cemetery until 1895 when the church burned for the second time and was not rebuilt.¹³⁹

Kewaunee County constructed a Catholic church just north of Duval, located on the county line. Father Deams, so instrumental in the Walloons' settlement in the area, organized the group and in 1860 land was donated. However, most likely due to the outbreak of the Civil War, the church, named St. Francis de Paul, was not built until 1869.¹⁴⁰

Nothing is known of the religious activities of the original Protestant immigrants during their first years in Wisconsin, other than that the Philippe Hannon family returned to Catholicism. However, with the arrival of Xavier Martin in 1857, the Protestants seemed to regroup and by 1861 founded the Robinsonville Presbyterian Church with twenty-one founding members, all of whom, with one exception, were from the Grez-Doiceau area.¹⁴¹ Although Walloon was the common language, the services were conducted in classical French until 1913, with its ministers

¹³⁷ Tlachac, 25.

¹³⁸ John Kahlert, *Pioneer Cemeteries: Door County Wisconsin* (Bailey's Harbor, Wisconsin: Meadow Lane Publishers, 1981), 77.

¹³⁹ Burton, 45-46, Kahlert, 77-78.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁴¹ deSmet, 40-41.

supplied by the French Presbyterian Theological Seminaries of Canada.¹⁴² There is no record of any conflicts between Catholics and Protestants. In his writings regarding the relationship between the Catholic and the much smaller Protestant contingencies, Martin cites incidents of Protestants contributing material and labor towards the building of a Catholic church, and vice versa.¹⁴³ Apparently, the ethnic bond between these immigrants was more important than differing spiritual beliefs.

Belgians have the reputation of being very social people and, as with most immigrant groups, their social structure revolved around their church community. But these immigrant Walloons were unusual in the extent to which they were dedicated to the social aspect of being part of a church community. Social contact was such an integral part of their Sunday fellowship that as churches were built, saloons appeared nearby—usually right next to the church. The immigrants enjoyed being part of a group gossiping, exchanging news, and sharing a joke, but did not believe the church to be an appropriate place in which to do so. Consequently, after the service, the congregation would go next door to the saloon for an extended visit.¹⁴⁴ This weekly religious sharing and socializing was an important element for maintaining the interconnectedness of the community.

Another Belgian religious custom the immigrants brought with them was the construction of small family roadside chapels, or prayer-houses, located on their farms but somewhat removed from their homes (Figure 2.1). Just as in Belgium, as the families were able, they constructed the windowless frame chapels, usually nine feet in length and seven and a half feet in width, with an altar against the wall opposite the door. Easily mistaken for tool sheds were it not for the cross above the door or at the roof peak, these chapels were traditionally left unlocked and open for anyone's use at any time. The chapels were built adjacent to section line roads for easy access and were considered community property. In

¹⁴² Judith Carlsen, "Amazing Grace," *Voyageur: Historical Review of Brown County and Northeast Wisconsin* 28, issue 1 (Summer/Fall, 2011): 41-42.

¹⁴³ X. Martin, 384.

¹⁴⁴ H. R. Holand, *History of Door County: The County Beautiful, Volume I and II* (Ellison Bay, Wisconsin: Wm. Caxton Ltd, 1993), 418.

Belgium they were usually constructed of brick or stone but in the Belgian settlement area wood was used.¹⁴⁵



Figure 2.1 Walloon Roadside Chapel Source: Paul and Francis Burtons, *Door County Stories and Stories from the Belgium Settlement*

One of the immigrants' most pressing needs continued to be roads. Although the first immigrants did not have the means to purchase horses or even oxen to pull harvested wheat to a grist mill, within a few years conditions had improved enough that there were some who were able acquire livestock. However, there were no roads to support wheeled vehicles. What roads did exist were hastily constructed by the settlers and were corduroy roads, meaning they were composed of logs laid horizontally across the path cut through the forest. Soil was then spread over the logs in an attempt to create a smoother surface. These roads were little more than twenty feet wide and, full of stumps, rocks, and water holes, were in terrible condition most of the time.¹⁴⁶ Even trails were scarce and made travel by foot difficult and dangerous. There were numerous reports of people lost, or nearly lost, due to losing their way in the forest or

¹⁴⁵ William G. Laatsch and Charles F. Calkins, "Belgian Roadside Chapels of the Door Peninsula," *Voyageur* 20, no. 1 (2003): 49-52.

¹⁴⁶ Holand, 414.

being pursued by wild animals when walking to a destination. Typical was the ordeal of a man who lost his way when attempting to walk from Green Bay to Sturgeon Bay. After three days of wandering in the wilderness, and suffering through a snow storm, he stumbled into the Belgian settlement approximately twenty miles northeast of Green Bay and was revived. The newspaper account optimistically predicts, "This is probably the last of these harrowing cases we shall hear of on the Peninsula as the wagon road between the two Bays is now being prosecuted with vigor and will certainly be finished through by the first week in January."¹⁴⁷

Apparently the road project did not go forward, as a year later the newspaper was still advocating for a road through the Belgian settlement. In an article reprinted in the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, the Green Bay paper acknowledged that most citizens regarded the region as unbroken wilderness and were unaware of the population cultivating farms throughout the area. Making a case for the potential advantages for Green Bay, another article appeared in 1858 stating that a good plank or gravel road would be more of a positive benefit to the city than any other project of similar cost. Acknowledging that the settlement happened so quietly that many were unaware of the thousands of Belgians that were successfully farming the area, the author makes the point that by the time a road could be built, there would certainly be an "important surplus" to be brought to markets in Green Bay.¹⁴⁸ Later in 1858, the Green Bay paper again spoke well of the value of the products being produced by the settlers of north east Brown County and Kewaunee County. Bemoaning the fact that there was still barely a passable road in the entire district, the paper warned that Green Bay would lose out if something was not done to bring the Belgians' trade in their direction.¹⁴⁹

In addition to inaccessibility to markets, the lack of roads caused the Belgians great difficulty when getting their wheat ground into flour, once it had been harvested. Exacerbating the hardship created by the lack of roads was the fact that the nearest grist mills in the area

¹⁴⁷ "Narrow Escape," *Door County Advocate*, January 17, 1856.

¹⁴⁸ "Something Which Is Needed," *Green Bay Advocate*, March 4, 1858.

¹⁴⁹ "A Turnpike Road Wanted," *Green Bay Advocate*, November 18, 1858.

were in Wolf River (now Algoma) and Bay Settlement. The responsibility of getting the wheat to the mill fell to the women who would carry a bushel at a time through the woods to the mill several miles away, and then walk home carrying the flour. One Belgian woman recalled that as a young woman she walked from her settlement, now Lincoln, Kewaunee County, to the mill at De Pere, thirty miles away, carrying a sixty-pound sack of wheat. She had to leave before dawn, usually by three o'clock, and would not reach the mill until six that evening. After spending the night sleeping on sacks, she walked back home, this time carrying the flour.¹⁵⁰

As was the established pattern, relief, when it came, originated from within the Walloon community itself. In the early 1850s, Freeman Gardner settled in Door County and built a saw mill in Little Sturgeon, on the northern end of the Belgian settlement area. This was soon followed by a gristmill, the first in Door County. At harvest time as many as forty or fifty customers at a time would come through the woods from the farms of southern Door County, and wait their turn to have their harvested wheat ground into flour. Gardner next built a rooming house where the farmers could cook and sleep. Before long he began stocking supplies the Belgians needed and for which he was willing to barter, thus creating a market for the farmers' produce. Not only was this a great convenience for the rural community, but Gardner was able to provide employment for the immigrants during the winter months, saving them the much longer walk to Green Bay or Milwaukee. Gardner's establishment became the largest business establishment in the county.¹⁵¹ To accommodate his growing businesses, Gardner needed a road through the Belgian community, from Sturgeon Bay to Bay Settlement, which would enable him to transport some of his products overland, as an alternative to shipping by water. With Gardner's motivation to supply the momentum, along with some funds that were now being supplied by the county, the much sought after road was completed. However, it closely followed the Green Bay shoreline, skirting the edge of the settlement area. Since the Walloon immigrants had located their farms inland, the road did not directly impact their lives. The road

¹⁵⁰ Lillian Krueger, "Motherhood on the Wisconsin Frontier," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, December, 1945, 157.

¹⁵¹ Tlachac, 19-21.

was occasionally useful to the Walloons for getting products to the Green Bay and Sturgeon Bay markets, and for bringing in supplies, but there remained a lack of roads within the Walloon settlement area thus continuing their isolation. At the same time, the continued isolation was an important element of their continued cohesiveness and ability to maintain their ethnic identity.

By the fall of 1858 conditions had improved to the extent that the Belgians, who brought their love for their traditional Walloon celebrations and festivals with them, held the first Kermis in their new settlement. Kermis is the biggest and most important celebration of the year for Belgians and is meant to give thanks to God for the harvest—as well as provide an occasion to have a rousing good time. Following tradition, mass on Sunday morning is followed by the first dance held in the road. Known as the dance of the dust, it is a recognition of the soil from which the harvest grew.¹⁵² This is followed by a day of dancing, eating, drinking, and competing in such traditional activities as climbing a greased pole, foot races, and playing the popular Walloon card game “couyon.” One competition that was eventually discontinued involved burying a goose so that only his head was above ground. The blindfolded contestant would then attempt to decapitate the goose with a scythe. These festivities traditionally continued over three-day weekends for six consecutive weeks, each week at a different location, and the custom was continued in the settlement area as it developed and clusters of settlers were able to host the three day celebration.¹⁵³ As churches were built, each parish would take its turn hosting the entire community for three days of eating, drinking, and merry making. Into the twentieth century, the settlers, both men and women, still wore the handmade, wooden shoes typical of their homeland. However, for such an important occasion as Kermis, they dug out their leather shoes, as well as the wide trousers and loose fitting saurot or blouse of the men and the tight bodice and voluminous skirts, topped with snow white aprons, of the women, all part of their traditional dress.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Fred L. Holmes, *Old World Wisconsin: Around Europe in the Badger State* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin: E. M. Hale and Company, 1944) 164.

¹⁵³ Holand, 206.

¹⁵⁴ Lee Metzner, “The Belgian Kermis,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, June, 1931, 347.

Other holidays important to the Walloons in Wisconsin included St. Nicholas Day on December 6, which was similar to present-day Christmas with St. Nicholas bringing gifts for good children; Christmas, which was observed by attending church services and visiting friends or family; New Year's Day, when families went to church and then spent the day eating traditional food with neighbors; Rogation Days, occurring in May and involving petitions for the blessing of abundant crops; the first Sunday of Lent, observed by the lighting of a huge bonfire meant to ward off the Devil and remind the Belgians that Lent, a time of personal sacrifice, had begun; Easter, again involving churchgoing and family visits; and Assumption Day, observed on August 15, involving specific church rituals.

A strictly secular tradition brought from Belgium and continued by the Walloons in Wisconsin was the planting of the Maypole. On May 1 the men would strip a felled balsam tree of all its branches except for a small tuft at the top, which would be embellished with ribbons. Soon after the spring elections, they would march to the home of the newly elected town official, set the tree up in front of his house, and after jokes and speeches, the honored man would furnish beer or drinks for the crowd. The Maypole was a symbol of authority and represented a pledge of allegiance, not only to the laws of the state but to a custom that required even family disputes to be submitted to these officials.¹⁵⁵ Additionally, the Belgians made every wedding, christening, family anniversary, and even funeral an occasion to be together and socialize. These gatherings not only helped ease homesickness but also maintained cohesion within the Belgian settlement.

¹⁵⁵ "Belgians—Social Life and Customs," Vertical File, Belgian Collection, University of Wisconsin at Green Bay. Also see Holmes, 151-152.

CHAPTER 3

A CHALLENGING DECADE

Walloon emigration to Wisconsin reached its peak in year 1857 and dropped dramatically in 1858. By then news of the cholera epidemic in Wisconsin had circulated throughout Belgium. Also news of the financial crisis in America, and the resulting difficulty in finding work, provided further discouragement. Finally, many of the families emigrating in the mid 1800s did not have the financial resources enjoyed by the earlier groups and therefore had a much harder time surviving the first year or two. When news of their hardships and struggles reached their home villages, emigration all but stopped.

By 1861, the lives of the Walloon immigrants had stabilized and conditions for them were improving. Most had cleared enough of their land to raise sufficient crops to meet their own needs as well as a surplus for market. Some were buying oxen and a few of the more successful settlers bought a horse or two. Schools as well as businesses, usually incorporating a general store and a tavern, were appearing in most settlements.¹⁵⁶ Numerous sawmills were constructed around the settlement area providing both work for the men in the winter months and a place where they could haul their felled trees and realize a profit from the hard work of clearing their land. Philippe Hannon even constructed a small brewery in which he made Belgian beer.¹⁵⁷ However, the next decade would bring two significant setbacks for the Walloon community.

With the outbreak of armed hostilities in 1861 between the Union and the Confederacy, Lincoln called for 75,000 militia volunteers for an enlistment period of three months, to put down the rebellion. Wisconsin's quota was one regiment of 743 men, which was filled with volunteers. The conflict continued and in 1862 the President called for an additional 300,000 volunteers to serve for nine months. Governor Salomon was notified that if Wisconsin's quota of 11,904 volunteers was not voluntarily met by August 15, the balance should be attained using

¹⁵⁶ X. Martin, 386.

¹⁵⁷ X. Martin, 387.

a draft.¹⁵⁸ Similar to other foreign-born immigrant groups in Wisconsin, the Belgians had not yet developed feelings of being “American,” but by this time the Walloons were citizens of the United States and Lincoln’s call affected them. An active recruiting campaign was carried out by the *Green Bay Advocate*, with every issue throughout the month of August carrying articles urging men to volunteer. One issue even insinuated that if there were not enough volunteers to put down the rebellion soon, “the Holy Alliance of European tyrannies” would intervene and overthrow the federal government. They would be robbed of their “liberties and cast back into the vassal condition of the downtrodden people of Europe.”¹⁵⁹ Several issues stated federal bounties of \$100 and state bounties of \$50 would be paid to those who enlisted, plus \$13 a month, and assistance for their families while they were away. If one were drafted, the monthly pay for soldiers would drop to \$11 and there would be no bounties.¹⁶⁰

As the state’s quota was not reached by volunteer enlistment, the draft was to begin November 10, 1862, but in spite of that threat, the Walloons of Brown County were bitterly opposed and refused to comply. On November 15, what became known as the “Belgian Riot” occurred. Several hundred men, armed with farm implements, guns, and clubs, marched into Green Bay and to the home of Senator Howe, Draft Commissioner. Senator Howe attempted to speak to the crowd but could not make himself understood, speaking only English. However, when French-speaking citizens were found to address the crowd and explain the war and the necessity of the draft, the “rioters” seemed satisfied and dispersed without violence.¹⁶¹ Two subsequent issues of the local newspaper defended the Belgians, arguing that “to a man they are Republican.”¹⁶² Perhaps as a way to help defuse additional trouble, John B. A. Masse, head of the Belgian Consulate in Green Bay, published a notice that any man who was drafted, but

¹⁵⁸ David Ellison, “The Civil War Draft in Plover and Stevens Point: A Study in Efforts, Attitudes, Frustrations, and Results,” Portage County Historical Society of Wisconsin, <http://www.pchswi.org/archives/misc/cwdraft.html> [accessed February 6, 2013].

¹⁵⁹ “Do Not Wait To Be Drafted,” *Green Bay Advocate*, August 2, 1862.

¹⁶⁰ “The Difference Between Volunteering and Drafting,” *Green Bay Advocate*, August 9, 1862.

¹⁶¹ “A Wee Bit of Excitement,” *Green Bay Advocate*, November 20, 1862.

¹⁶² “The Draft in Door and Neighboring Counties,” *Green Bay Advocate*, November 27, 1862.

claimed to be a Belgian subject, should contact the Consulate for assistance.¹⁶³ Presumably M. Masse would help the draftee prove his Belgian citizenship and thus avoid having to serve in the war.

One group of twenty-six men, all immigrants from the village of Grez and settlers in Brown, Kewaunee, or Door Counties, served in the military and of those, only two were drafted—the others volunteered. One of these two draftees was Phillippe Hannon of the original 1853 group who, by the time of his induction in 1864, was 54 years old! Originally from the same village in Brabant, the men who volunteered undoubtedly knew each other and, with several having the same enlistment date, one can conclude that, after discussing the situation, together they made the decision to enlist. Although the possibility of eventually being drafted must have given an air of inevitability to serving, the generous compensation surely was an incentive for many to volunteer, even if they did not consider themselves to be Americans.

The development of the settlement suffered a considerable setback due to the lack of the most capable workers—most of the men being in camp or at the front.¹⁶⁴ Their wives and children, sisters, and sometimes mothers were left to cultivate the farms and tend the livestock as best they could in order to support themselves. During those years it was common to see Belgian women driving the oxen in an attempt to plow or harvest a field.¹⁶⁵ Little time was available to manufacture the shingles which had become an important source of income for the Walloon families before the men left for duty.

With the return of the men at the end of the war, the Belgians resumed their activities and over the next six years enjoyed a period of prosperity not previously achieved. Eight new sawmills were constructed in the settlement area, as well as two grist mills.¹⁶⁶ The 1870 report of John Masse, the Belgian Consul in Green Bay, reports there were 20,000,000

¹⁶³ Masse, "Consulate of Belgium," *Green Bay Advocate*, November 26, 1862.

¹⁶⁴ De Smet, 34.

¹⁶⁵ X. Martin, 388.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 388.

handmade shingles marketed in Green Bay the year before.¹⁶⁷ The market for shingles continued to grow and with the advent of machine-made shingles, production increased dramatically. Of the eight new sawmills operating in the Belgian settlement area after the Civil War, five produced machine-made shingles.¹⁶⁸ In 1868, Gardner added a lathe and machine-made shingle mill with the capacity to produce eighty thousand shingles a day.¹⁶⁹ By 1870, Brown County was regarded as the leading shingle producer of the world, as the number marketed in Green Bay reached 500,000,000.¹⁷⁰ Not only were the Belgians able to profit from the sale of their cut trees, but those who were seeking wage labor were able to work at the sawmills. The era of handmade shingles was ending but the Belgians were still able to benefit financially from the shingle market without going far from home. The future appeared bright and many thought the worst years were behind them. However, 1871 brought a disaster far more profound than the Civil War.

The summer of 1871 was unusually dry, with no rainfall from July 5 until mid-October. Swamps, streams, and wells dried up. By September, people were becoming uneasy as forest fires sprang up throughout northeastern Wisconsin. Corduroy roads and fences burned and the Belgian immigrants, having built their log cabins with wood shingle roofs, had to be constantly vigilant against falling burning cinders. The city of Green Bay was threatened by fires in the surrounding forests and for several days prior to the "great fire" inhabitants suffered from burning eyes and breathing became painful due to the smoke and ash-filled air.¹⁷¹ Numerous buildings caught fire and only the combined efforts of local inhabitants prevented total loss. Ships sailing the Bay had to use compasses to navigate and frequently blow their fog horns as the air was so thick with smoke.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁷ Masse, 3.

¹⁶⁸ X. Martin, 388.

¹⁶⁹ Flora Jacobs, "Gardner Town History Reviewed by Wm. Gilson," *Door County News*, November 21, 1961.

¹⁷⁰ Deborah Beaumont Martin, *The History of Brown County Wisconsin: Past and Present* (Chicago: The S. J. Clark Publishing Company, 1913), 191.

¹⁷¹ "The Great Fire," *Green Bay Advocate*, October 12, 1871.

¹⁷² D. Martin, 229.

On October 8, a southerly wind that had prevailed that afternoon reached gale force in the evening and, on the east side of the waters of Green Bay, drove the fire over most of Brown County, Kewaunee County, and into southern Door County.¹⁷³ So rapidly did the fire travel that witnesses referred to it as a “fire tornado,” with many of the survivors reporting balls of fire blown across the tops of the trees which then enveloped everything.

Sometimes referred to by meteorologists as the Sirocco wind, this continental scale weather phenomena is caused by barometric pressure differences and, once started, blows with great force, sometimes attaining hurricane force (Figure 3.1).

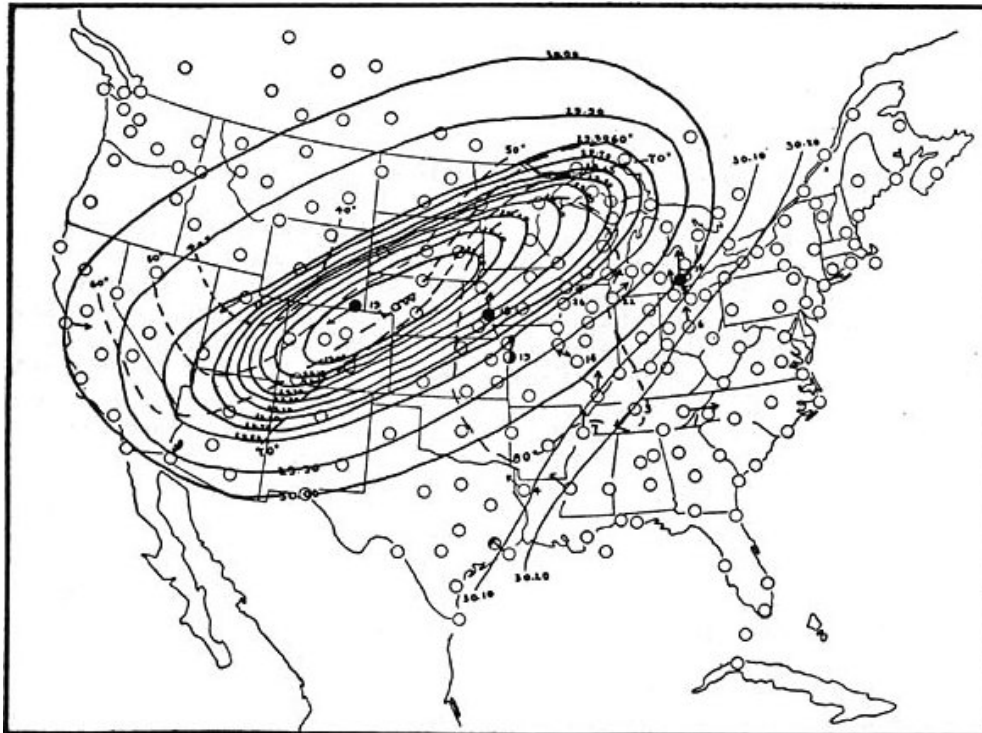


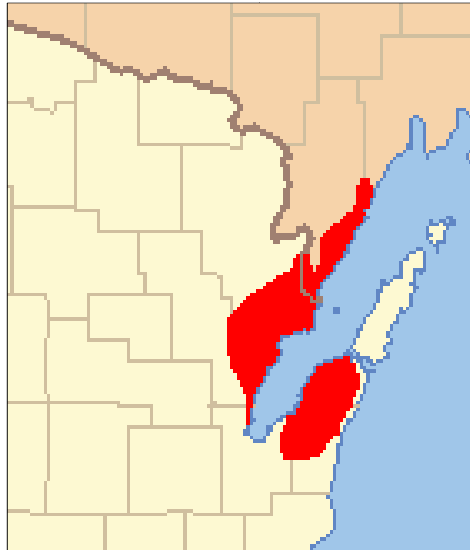
Figure 3.1 US Weather Bureau Map - Showing cyclonic storm that prevailed on the day of the Chicago and Peshtigo Fires Made by US Army Signal Service observers at 5:35pm central standard time October8, 1871

A fire burning under these conditions travels with frightening speed, and the intense heat produces a strong upward current which carries burning cinders great distances resulting

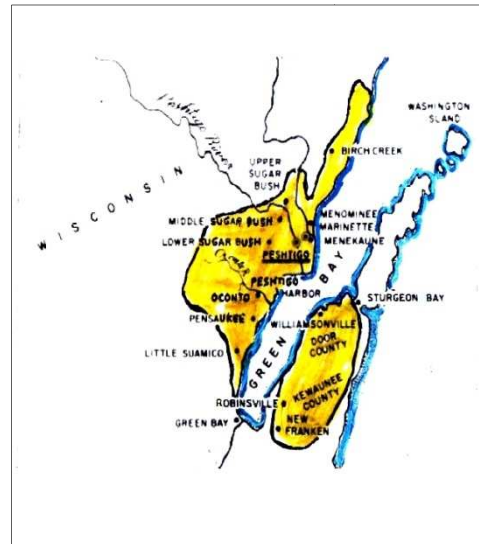
¹⁷³ *Green Bay Advocate*, October 12, 1871.

in a “crown fire” that, unlike a common ground fire, travels rapidly across the tops of the trees.¹⁷⁴ In a matter of two hours the fire had burned a swath through the Belgian settlement six to twelve miles wide and sixty miles long (Figure 3.2), destroying almost everything in its path.

Figure 3.2 Area destroyed by forest fire October 8,1871



<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/83/PeshtigoFireExtended.png>



<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~wioconto/firepic.jpg>

The hardest hit was the village of Williamsonville, a few miles south of Little Sturgeon. The settlement had centered around the sawmill run by the Belgian brothers Tom and Fred Williamson and included a store, boarding house, large barn, blacksmith shop, eight homes, and various outbuildings. There were seventy-seven residents, all either members of the Williamson family or employees of the mill. Aware of the potential for fire, they earlier had attempted to protect their settlement by carefully burning out the woods to the distance of a mile around their clearing.¹⁷⁵ Unfortunately, with the force of intense wind driving them, crown fires jumped much greater distances, especially when occurring at the time of drought. The entire

¹⁷⁴ Joseph Schafer, “Great Fires of Seventy-One,” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, September, 1927, 108.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

village was destroyed and of the seventy-seven residents, sixty died.¹⁷⁶ In addition to the human loss, sixteen out of seventeen horses, five out of six oxen, and forty swine burned to death. A few miles southeast was Brussels where every settler lost most, if not all, of his belongings and twenty-two lost their lives.¹⁷⁷ Just west of Brussels had been the settlement of Forestville. Of the six families who had been living there, only one escaped. All the buildings were burned and thirty-four bodies were found and buried.¹⁷⁸ In Door County alone, two mills, two boarding houses, three churches, six schoolhouses, three stores, two saloons, one hundred forty-eight homes and an equal number of barns were totally destroyed.¹⁷⁹

In Brown County, the Belgian settlements of Casco, Humbolt, Robinsonville, Harrison's Pier, Thyry Daems and Dyckesville were all but destroyed. The northeastern section of Green Bay Township was almost entirely Belgian, and it was also badly burned. In just the towns of Green Bay, Casco, and Red River, the fire resulted in 1,128 people becoming destitute.

New Franken, Kewaunee County, on the southern end of Belgian settlement, was populated by a mixture of Belgians and Germans. It was a prosperous village which contained a saw mill, a blacksmith shop, the district school and a post office. After the fire passed through the area, nothing remained of the village and the twenty families who had lived there were homeless.¹⁸⁰ Any livestock in the area not burned to death by the fire had to be destroyed as there was no feed, or even grass for them. The next day, October 9, a drenching rain fell for several hours.

Green Bay's mayor Alonzo Kimball organized committees of relief for each ward and relief depots were established.¹⁸¹ The *Green Bay Advocate* stated they had from "the most reliable sources" that not less than 3,000 men, women, and children were rendered entirely destitute, and went on to point out to its readership that, although immediate needs had been

¹⁷⁶ Deana C. Hipke, *The Great Peshtigo Fire of 1871*, <http://peshtigofire.info/> [accessed February 2, 2013].

¹⁷⁷ "Fire of Fifty Years Ago," *Sturgeon Bay Advocate*, October 14, 1921.

¹⁷⁸ "Another Hamlet Burned—Great Loss of Life!" *Green Bay Advocate*, October 12, 1871.

¹⁷⁹ Holand, 421.

¹⁸⁰ Jarstad, 429.

¹⁸¹ D. Martin, 231.

supplied by generous donations, these people had to be provided for during the upcoming winter.¹⁸² As the news spread, donations came not only from all over America but from friends and relatives in Belgium, as letters from the settlers carried the news to their former villages. One letter dated October 15, 1871 from Louis Lamarre, lists the names of those victims originally from Grez. He went on to describe the village of Rosiere which had been located near his farm and had been made up of one hundred twenty houses, three of which survived the fire.¹⁸³

Xavier Martin was actively involved with the relief effort and supervised the distribution of provisions sent by tug to Dyckesville to be distributed to Red River and Robinsonville.¹⁸⁴ However, survivors who were any distance inland were very difficult to reach. One volunteer told of starting out with a group from Sturgeon Bay heading south with the plan of reaching Williamsonville. They were bringing a wagonload of provisions, clothing, and tools but after a full day of attempting to get through, had only covered four miles as the roads were blocked by burned and still burning timber. With six miles still to go, the men loaded themselves with all they could carry and the wagon, with most of the supplies, turned back.¹⁸⁵

The fire burned an area totaling more than 280,000 acres consisting of areas in Door, Kewaunee, and Brown Counties and additional counties on the western side of the waters of Green Bay. There were 1,152 people known dead, 350 believed dead, 1,500 seriously injured, and more than 3,000 left homeless.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸² "An Appeal," *Green Bay Advocate*, October 19, 1871.

¹⁸³ "Lettres D'Amerique 1855-1909," Vertical File, Belgian Collection, University of Wisconsin at Green Bay.

¹⁸⁴ X. Martin, 390.

¹⁸⁵ Holand, 421.

¹⁸⁶ "Peshtigo Fire," *Dictionary of Wisconsin History*, Wisconsin Historical Society, http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/dictionary/index.asp?action=view&term_id=451&search_type_id=3&term_type_text=Things&letter=P [accessed March 1, 2013]

CHAPTER 4

STARTING OVER

Showing almost unbelievable resolve and resilience, the Walloons quickly began the process of rebuilding their communities. Dealing with the grief of losing family members and close friends, as well as all the material goods they had worked so long and hard to accumulate, and with many carrying lifelong emotional or physical scars, they faced the work ahead. Some families chose to move into Green Bay, unable to undertake the work of rebuilding their farms, but nowhere is there any indication of a desire to give up and return to Belgium. As thousands of acres of timberland had been destroyed, the lumber and shingle mills were not rebuilt, and the Belgians lost an important source of revenue as the lumber companies moved their operations west of Green Bay. The loss of maple trees also meant the end of the maple syrup and maple sugar revenues. However, these resourceful settlers, perhaps remembering why they had originally immigrated to northeast Wisconsin, turned their entire attention to the business of agriculture. Of the seventy-nine Belgian head of household respondents to the 1870 Census for the Township of Brussels, all but four stated their occupation to be farmer. There was one blacksmith and three men who listed their occupation as laborer.¹⁸⁷ Most likely they were farm laborers. After 1871, growing their crops, raising livestock, marketing wool, and producing cheese and butter became the Walloons' primary enterprises.¹⁸⁸

They first addressed the challenge of constructing new houses and barns, new schools and churches, and enlarging their farms.¹⁸⁹ Finding that some timber from burned houses and barns could be salvaged and that some trees which appeared burned beyond usefulness actually contained undamaged centers, the building progressed at surprising speed with the wood cutting being done over the winter so as to be ready for construction in the spring. It was at this time that the Walloons abandoned the log construction methods used before the fire, and

¹⁸⁷ 1870 Federal Census Door County, Brussels Township, Brown County Library, Green Bay, Wisconsin.

¹⁸⁸ X. Martin, 392.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 391.

instead initiated another tradition brought from Belgium whereby houses were constructed from brick or stone.¹⁹⁰ Whether from a longing to recreate the appearance of their home villages or because they were now mindful of the vulnerability of wood, the new homes built by the Walloons were veneered with red brick and the architecture reproduced the style prevalent in Belgium. The houses were uniform in size, scale, detail, and floor plan. There was a brickyard one mile south of Brussels where, operating at maximum capacity, the facility made bricks from the red clay of that area.¹⁹¹ Other brickyards operating in Algoma, Sturgeon Bay, and Forestville flourished with a good supply of clay and a ready market. In 1898, the brickyard in Algoma produced four hundred thousand machine-made bricks, while one in Champion, producing hand-shaped bricks, produced two hundred thousand. The clay throughout the area fired into an attractive red brick and the countryside was soon dotted with the traditional, red brick Belgian homes.¹⁹²

Another structure appearing at this time and exactly replicating the ones in the homeland was the Belgian bake oven. A separate structure from the ever-present summer kitchen, the bake oven is attached to and accessed from the summer kitchen. Construction was precise and uniform—baking was done by radiant heat so the dimensions of the oven were critical. The only departure from the ones found in Belgium was that in Europe it is common for the ovens to be free standing, as they are often used communally. Due to weather and the distances between farms, this was not practical in Wisconsin.¹⁹³ Within four years of the fire, the villagers of Brussels had recovered enough to begin work on their church. Until this time, church gatherings and the occasional mass were said in private residences. Three acres of land was donated by Alexis Franc and the work of hauling material began. As was typical throughout the Belgian area, most of the labor was furnished by the future congregation's men

¹⁹⁰ "Red Brick Homes Mark of Belgian Settlement," *Milwaukee Journal*, May 9, 1926.

¹⁹¹ Tlachac, 33.

¹⁹² Burton, 26.

¹⁹³ Laatsch, William G. and Charles F. Calkins, "Belgians in Wisconsin," in *To Build in a New Land: Ethnic Landscapes in North America*, edited by Allen G. Noble (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 198-199, 202-204.

who, after completing a day of working on their farms, traveled to the construction site and volunteered their skills for the construction of the church. The formal opening of St. Francis took place in August, 1878, but until 1919 it was considered by the Catholic hierarchy to be a mission church, meaning it did not have a full time priest assigned to it.¹⁹⁴

Since their land was now cleared, the farmers turned to increased production of wheat, oats, barley, rye, buckwheat, and other grains with which they were familiar before emigration. They began experimenting with fruit trees and, already aware of the abundance of wild berries growing throughout the area, experimented with large-scale berry production. They also were able to expend more effort in the raising of livestock. In 1872 the Wisconsin Dairymen Association had been formed in Jefferson County for the purpose of improving dairy products and safety within the dairy industry of Wisconsin, as well as securing the best methods for shipment and sale. Within ten years there were a dozen cheese factories within the Belgian settlement area and in another four years that number had doubled. These cheese manufacturers were producing from one thousand to two thousand pounds of cheese a week.¹⁹⁵

Pigs had been raised on a small scale before the fire, but afterwards their production increased. This could be done cheaply since during the summer and fall, the pigs were left to wander the meadows and fend for themselves, eating various plants, acorns, and roots. In the late fall, after harvesting crops, the Belgians rounded them up for slaughter. Pork was considered a staple meat for which there was always a market. The Walloons also added sheep to their inventory of livestock, again because sheep could forage in the available grasses and undergrowth, and there was no longer significant danger from wolves and other wild animals. There was a good market for mutton, and in the cold northern climate there was also a market for wool.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ "Brussels Church Observes 50th Year," *Sturgeon Bay News*, September 20, 1928.

¹⁹⁵ *Wisconsin French Connections*. 3.

¹⁹⁶ Charles I. Martin, *History of Door County, Wisconsin Together with Biographies of Nearly 700 Families and Mention of 4,000 Persons* (Sturgeon Bay, 1881), 13-14.

The Walloons experimented with production of another crop reminiscent of their homeland. Flax had a long history in Belgium and that country was one of the leading producers of linen. In 1887 a group of immigrant men organized an association, the purpose of which was the cultivation of flax and manufacture of linen. A Mr. Bosse, one of the leaders of the group, had twenty years' experience in Belgium and was familiar with all aspects of linen production. In addition, many of the Belgian farmers were experienced in the cultivation of flax.¹⁹⁷ That there was a market for linen, at the least among the fifteen to twenty thousand Walloons living in Wisconsin, is evidenced by the letter sent to Belgium requesting family members to send linen.¹⁹⁸

At the same time, the Walloons met their responsibilities as members of their communities by serving as members of school boards, town supervisors, clerks, treasurers, assessors, and justices of the peace. By 1893, forty years after the first Belgian immigrants arrived, there were Walloons serving as Sheriff of Kewaunee County, Treasurer of Door County, Sheriff of Brown County, Superintendent of Schools for Kewaunee County, County Clerk of Brown County, and Clerk of the Circuit Court in Brown County.¹⁹⁹ As they did not form the majority on a countywide basis in any of these three counties, their election to these offices shows there existed some intermingling with other ethnic groups, and reflects the respect afforded them by fellow settlers. This also quells any question of their being victims of discrimination by other settlers. Apparently, the segregation of the Walloon community was voluntary.

Writing his memoirs in 1893, Xavier Martin, reflecting on the prosperity achieved by his fellow Walloons in less than a half century, stated that within three years of the fire the Belgians were in "better condition and circumstance" than before.²⁰⁰ Although corn was a staple crop with a market demand, and it was common for farmers settling in ethnic islands of North

¹⁹⁷ "Flax Culture Proposed," *Green Bay Advocate*, January 27, 1887.

¹⁹⁸ Letter dated February 8, 1864 from Louis Houbrecks to his brother and sister, "Jacqmot Family."

¹⁹⁹ X. Martin, 393.

²⁰⁰ X. Martin, 392.

America to abandon their traditional crops raised in Europe and switch to corn, he does not mention the Belgians raising corn.²⁰¹ Instead he praises their fine crops of wheat, barley, rye, and oats—all crops that were raised in Belgium. He twice observed that several settlements, such as Granlez and Rosiere, had taken down their fences and that the fields look like the fields of Belgium.²⁰² No doubt this impression was reinforced by the Walloon reproduction of traditional Belgian architecture as seen in their brick homes, the wayside chapels, and the bake ovens, as well as the settlement-wide pattern of contiguous hamlets with the absence of any incorporated towns.

Had he been closer, he undoubtedly would have observed that it sounded just like Belgium as well. Of the 561 respondents to the 1899 census for the Township of Brussels for example, more than one-third stated they spoke no English at all. Of those who did, it was often the male head of the household, and most likely he spoke only the English necessary for conducting business with members of other immigrant groups. Walloon was still the commonly used language. That same census also noted the nationality of the respondent's parents. One respondent claimed a Belgian father and a Bohemian mother. Another claimed a German father and a Belgian mother. And one other was a mixture of Belgian and French Canadian. All other respondents claimed both parents to be Belgian, showing the almost nonexistence of intermarriage with other ethnic groups.

Through the continuation of their language, religion, and culture, the Walloons were able to maintain their ethnic identity more successfully than most immigrant groups in America. Immigrating to Wisconsin because of their desire to own land and farm, the Walloon immigrants were guided by a dedication to the same values and lifestyle, and these values were adopted by subsequent generations. A study of plat maps of the turn of the century show the land

²⁰¹ Jordan and Rowntree, 283.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 393.

overwhelmingly remaining in the hands of the Belgian families who originally pioneered the area.²⁰³

²⁰³ Gerry Strey, *Land Ownership Maps and Atlases of Wisconsin, 1836-1960* (Madison: Wisconsin: State Historical Society, 1995).

CONCLUSION

A great deal of research and analysis has been directed toward the millions of immigrants who made the journey to the United States, some with the intent of becoming permanent residents, and others with the idea of finding work, saving their wages, and eventually returning to their places of origin to begin a better life there. Much of this work has been directed toward the study of the interaction between immigrants and their new environments, the attempts of immigrants to retain their ethnic cultures, the establishment of ethnic enclaves in industrial urban centers, and the eventual weakening, experienced by most ethnic groups, of ethnic identities. While this inevitable weakening of ethnicity informed the work of immigration historians until the 1960s, there were some variations in theories regarding how this would occur. Some assumed the second or third generation would acquiesce to the dominant Anglo-American core as a way of attaining upward mobility. Other historians foresaw the breakdown being along the religious grouping of Catholic, Protestant, or Jew. Still another methodology envisioned the United States being a melting pot where ethnic identities would blend and disappear forming a new "American."

Working from the prevailing belief that ethnic identities disappeared by the second or third generation, some historians hypothesized that this loss of identity left the immigrant disorganized, alienated from the urban environment in which he now found himself, and struggling to support himself and his family in the least desirable, lowest paying jobs. The breakdown of traditional, Old World patterns, according to this theory, led to the disintegration of family controls on the next generation with ruinous effects on the ethnic culture.²⁰⁴

The 1960s saw a major shift in the focus of research on immigration history with the publication of Rudolph Vecoli's work emphasizing the retention of Old World ethnicities, albeit with some degree of acculturation.²⁰⁵ Vecoli's detailed research of the various Italian

²⁰⁴ Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that Made the American People* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1952) 240-258.

²⁰⁵ Vecoli, "Contadini in Chicago," 408.

neighborhoods of Chicago established that there was not a generic “Italian.” Supporting the thesis presented in this paper, his work warned against generalizing about immigration groups and stressed that immigration research must be done on the micro level, on specific groups, moving from specific areas to specific areas, at specific points in time. This would be the only way to discover why some groups were able to retain their ethnic culture while others were not.²⁰⁶ This fostered further research by scholars focusing on ethnicity as a category of identification and a way to explore how these ethnic groups affected each other, as well as ways they were affected by the dominant culture.

The work of labor historians addressed the lives of the urban, working class and the process of “Americanization” occurring on shop floors and in union halls, where the immigrants’ common grievances toward working conditions, wages, and hours diminished the importance of ethnic differences. These studies overwhelmingly focused on urban immigrants and the degree to which interaction with the receiving culture, as well as daily contact with other immigrant groups, led to some degree of decline in ethnic identity. As unions formed and focused on common grievances against the bosses, the workers realized the value of inter-ethnic solidarity and placed more importance on their economic goals than on ethnic prejudices.²⁰⁷

The focus shifted again in the 1980s when John Bodnar published his research illustrating the degree of success immigrant groups had in retaining pre-migration cultural patterns, even while adjusting to the effects of capitalism and class formation. The family remained the center of their lives and it was where “past values and present realities were reconciled.”²⁰⁸ Bodnar focused on the everyday lives of the urban immigrant in the United States in the century after 1830, and explored the ways transitioning to the capitalist system affected their values and identities.

²⁰⁶ Vecoli, “Chicago’s Little Italies,” 16, 18.

²⁰⁷ James Barrett, “Americanization from the Bottom Up: Immigration and the Remaking of the Working Class in the United States, 1880-1930,” *The Journal of American History* 79, no. 3, Discovering America: A Special Issue (December, 1992) 1010.

²⁰⁸ Bodnar, 213.

However, little work has focused on those immigrants choosing to settle in rural environments. Still less research has been done on those few rural groups who have been able to maintain their ethnic culture for many generations after immigration. The Walloons are one such group, the study of which represents a recognition that occasional strong ethnic islands persist. The exploration of their unique and specific characteristics presents an opportunity to better understand what elements are essential to the continued cohesiveness of ethnic groups.

Agreeing that there is no generic "Italian," "German," or even "Belgian," the research presented in this paper addresses Walloon immigrants coming from the hamlets of eastern Brabant and the Namur region of Hesbaye in south-central Belgium. In addition to sharing the same regional origin, members of the original group had belonged to the same small church congregation for approximately seven years and knew each other well. Most subsequent emigrants either knew each other or knew of the families making the move. Once relocated in northeastern Wisconsin, these immigrants maintained a cultural cohesiveness that had been well established long before the emigration occurred, sharing the same dialect, supporting common values and life-style, celebrating the same holidays, singing the same folk songs, and facing the same challenges. Settling in an isolated wilderness area devoid of human habitation other than a few scattered Indian families, the Walloons were spared the pressures of a dominant Anglo-American culture, as well as the challenge of conflicts with immigrants of other cultural origins. The only conflict with which the Walloons had to contend was with the environment and, as formidable as that was, it did little to threaten the preservation of their culture. Walloons were able to reestablish and retain the family-centered culture of the Old World village system.

Strengthening their cohesiveness was the apparent absence within the Walloon settlement of any impetus toward upward mobility or the formation of class distinction, thus eliminating the divisive conflicts that competition fosters. The Walloons were farmers, not entrepreneurs. When an occasional settler established a tavern, store, sawmill, or cheese

factory, it was as much a convenience for his neighbors and a place of social contact with other Walloons as a business enterprise designed to make a profit. Even when occasional men did launch a business, they usually continued to farm and to think of themselves as farmers. Francois Pierres is a good example. Although it is known that in 1861 he opened a tavern on his land just west of the village of Brussels, on the 1870 census he identified his occupation as farmer.²⁰⁹ Much more common among the Walloon farmers was the addition of more acres to their lands, improvements to their existing farms, or the expansion of their livestock when they were financially able to make the investment. The rural Belgian life had an almost communal character founded on a strong clan feeling among the Walloons. Due to the family unit being the most dominant feature, an individual attempting to rise above the others was not well thought of.²¹⁰

Although the Belgian immigrants were overwhelmingly Catholic, there were a small number of Protestants settlers as well. There are records of discord within each denomination, such as the disagreement over the location for a new Catholic church resulting in two churches being constructed and the splitting of the congregation. The Presbyterians at Robinsonville also had internal doctrinal disagreements which resulted in groups breaking from the original congregation.²¹¹ However, there is no record of any conflict between Catholics and Protestants. Apparently the bonds of a shared ethnicity among the Walloons minimized differing religious beliefs, repudiating the theory of the Triple Melting Pot being the dominant trend among immigrant groups.

The strength and persistence of the Walloon culture may have been enhanced by its role as the basis of identity for these immigrants. There is some evidence that they still identified with the old country. The "Brabanconne," the Belgian national anthem, and the

²⁰⁹ USGenWeb Census Project, "1870 Federal Census Door County, Wisconsin (File 2 of 15: Brussels)," USGenWeb Census Project, <http://www.usgwcensus.org/> [accessed February 9, 2013].

²¹⁰ John Kahlert, *Pioneer Cemeteries: Door County Wisconsin* (Baileys Harbor, Wisconsin: Meadow Lane Publishers, 1981), 194.

²¹¹ Carlsen, 42.

“Marseillaise” were sung at every Kermis.²¹² Letters kept them in contact with family and friends still in Wallonia and helped to maintain close ties. On the other hand, their letters are filled with expressions of satisfaction with their “new country.” In a letter from Charles Lhost to his siblings he states, “I wouldn’t want to be in Belgium any more.”²¹³ In another letter Lhost states he is thankful for having been led to such a good country. The immigrants had become citizens, voted, and expressed happiness at being in their new homes and, although they may not have fully developed a feeling of being American, they certainly were aware that they no longer were a part of Wallonia. It is likely that instead their sense of identity came from being a part of the Belgian settlement area.

Certain elements found in an environment become more significant in the retention of group cohesiveness when found in conjunction with others. Having a common region of origin is even more significant when coupled with a common religion.²¹⁴ Added to this, the Walloons shared the same dialect and the same occupation, and they had a shared history, having gone through the experience of emigration and several traumatic experiences together. Finally, when their isolation from the influence of a dominant society or other immigrant groups is added to these factors, an unusually cohesive ethnic island resulted. Fieldwork done as late as 1992 (Figure Conclusion.1) shows that within the Belgian settlement area, seventy to eighty percent of the land is still owned and farmed by Belgians and their descendants.²¹⁵ Typical of ethnic islands, most land is inherited, insuring the survival of the group cohesion. A social stigma is often attached to the sale of land of land to outsiders.²¹⁶

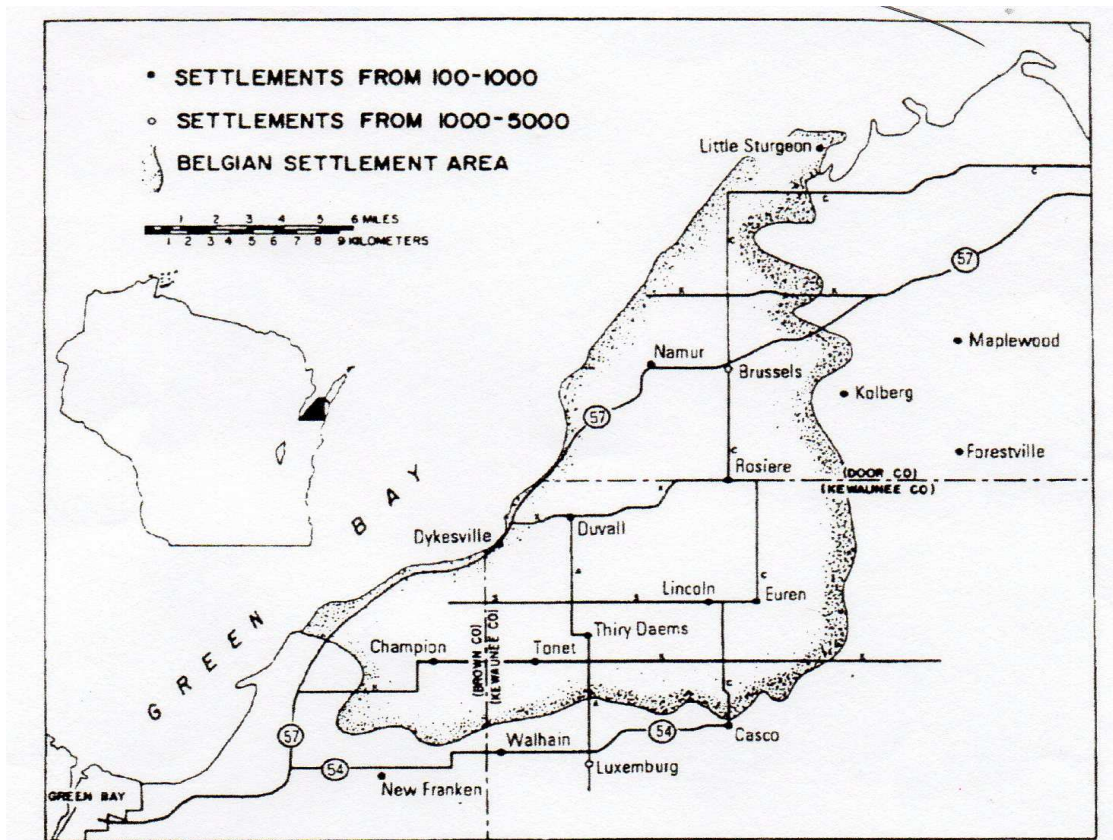
²¹² deSmet, 46.

²¹³ deSmet, 55.

²¹⁴ Kolb, 15.

²¹⁵ Laatch, “Belgians in Wisconsin,” 197.

²¹⁶ Jordan and Rowntree, 273.



Courtesy of William Laatsch

Figure Conclusion.1 Belgian settlement in northeastern Wisconsin – Map by W. Laatsch 1992

The continuing cohesiveness of the settlement area is further reflected in their language. Isolated ethnic groups sometimes preserve cultural elements in a purer form than is found in their homeland and the dialect spoken in the settlement area of Northeastern Wisconsin is a good example of this.²¹⁷ The Walloon still spoken by the descendants of the original immigrants is more pure than that spoken in Wallonia.²¹⁸ An ethnic concentration of this strength, one hundred and fifty years after immigration, is highly unusual and has resulted from the specific combination of circumstances found in the Walloon settlement.

²¹⁷ Jordon and Rowntree, 282-283.

²¹⁸ Nathan Phelps, "Old Language Needs New Life," *Green Bay Press Gazette*, September 29, 2003.

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