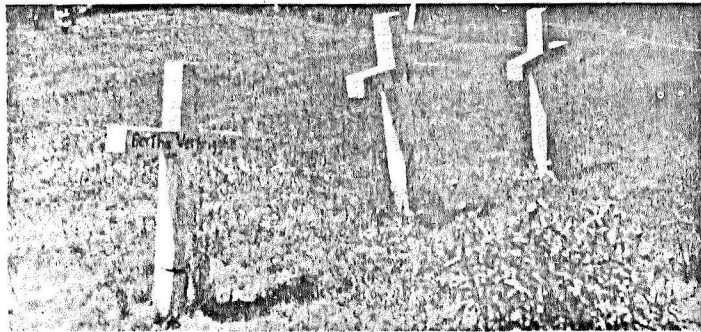


BELGIANS IN THE UPPER PENINSULA



ST. NICHOLAS CEMETERY

by Russell Magnaghi

"Belgian Town," "Belgian Settlement," St. Nicholas Road, names like Bellin, Jodocy, La Chapelle, Verbriggie, Heirman, Bonjean, Swille, and Van Damme are part of the Upper Peninsula today. Belgian immigrants first settled the Upper Peninsula in the late 19th century. A large number of Belgians settled in the Green Bay area on their way to the Upper Peninsula.

As the years passed these Wisconsin Belgians moved northward, attracted by good farmland and jobs in the iron mines of the Menominee and Gogebic ranges. By 1890 there were 785 Belgians in the Upper Peninsula. During the next two decades more Belgians arrived and by 1910 they were concentrated in Delta (270), Dickinson (625), Marquette (160), and Menominee (197) counties while the remaining 147 Belgians were to be found in every county except Keweenaw. Stephenson was once a Belgian village and just east of the community was a settlement known as Belgian Town inhabited by Walloons. Belgians were also residing in Carney, Nadeau, Wallace, Powers, Nathan, Hermansville, Escanaba, Gladstone, Vulcan, and Norway in large numbers. There was even an unsuccessful colony called Belga in the vicinity of Seney.

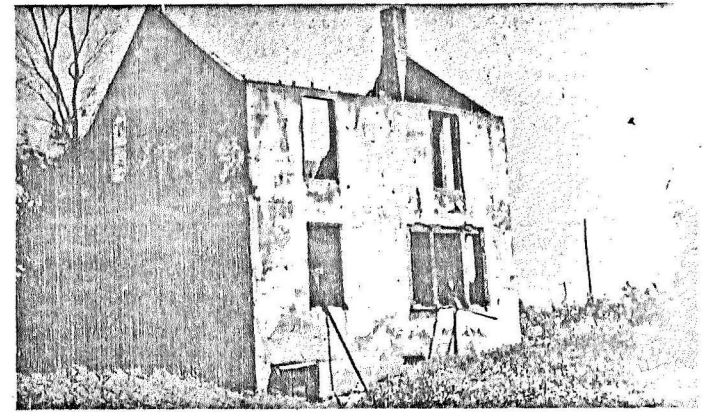
In the second decade of the 20th century an interesting experiment was undertaken to establish a Belgian farming

colony in the Upper Peninsula. Father Mathias Jodocy of Marquette addressed the initial meeting of the U.P., Development Bureau in February 1911 with a talk entitled, "Methods of Catholic Colonization." His talk outlined a program promoted by the American Catholic clergy to settle European Catholic immigrants in rural rather than urban areas. The idea took hold and soon land owned by the I. Stephenson Company in the Escanaba River valley in Delta and Marquette counties was made available for colonization through Dr. W.A. Cotton and Charles Thatcher. Father Jodocy corresponded with friends and relatives in his native Belgium, advertisements extolling the land and opportunity of the U.P. appeared in Belgian newspapers, and word spread among local Belgians.

The colony was called St. Nicholas Catholic Colony after a community in Belgium. One of the first settlers was Alphonse Heirman who was employed in loading iron ore into cars with a wheelbarrow at Norway and wanted to settle and "do a little pioneering." Other Flemish Belgians joined the community from the Belga colony. By the fall of 1912 and the spring of 1913 there were sixteen families, including Peter Jodocy, the brother of the priest.

Upon their arrival, the new colonists found the area relatively isolated and

The abandoned Jardin home was once a residence and general store. Constructed of poured concrete, this Belgian-style dwelling was extremely chilly in the winter.



hard work was necessary in cutting the second growth and preparing the land for agriculture. The early arrivals found shelter in abandoned lumber camp structures while the later arrivals constructed rough tar paper "shacks."

Their efforts were not in vain. By November, 1913 a Mr. Broeders had harvested some 2000 bushels of potatoes. The farmers carried on general purpose farming, developed dairy herds, and augmented their income working in the woods. The colony prospered. By the 1920's the community took on the appearance of the Belgian countryside the people had left as they constructed more substantial homes and barns.

The community centered around St. Nicholas Road and County Road 529. On the northeast intersection construction on a Catholic church was begun in the spring of 1913. After the concrete foundations and basement were poured the lack of funds ended further construction. The basement was roofed over and for years the priest from St. Joseph's church in Perkins said Mass monthly in the unfinished structure. A creamery was built close by and by the early 1920's the structure to be used as the pastor's home had been turned into a residence and general store.

Traditions were retained for many years. The Flemish language continued to be spoken and taught to the first generation but English quickly became the second language. At picnics and dances

accordians provided the music for Belgian songs and dances. However, due to the Americanization process and marriage outside the community most of these traditions have been lost.

The intense colonization hoped for by Father Jodocy and the Upper Peninsula Development Bureau was never fully realized. When World War I broke out in the summer of 1914 it separated many from their families and disrupted the migration of immigrants to the colony. After the war immigration was cut and the community peaked with a population of 35 families.

The sons and daughters of the original settlers continue to live in the vicinity of the former colony and prosper as farmers. Under the guidance of Joseph Heirman a former resident of the community and MSU Extension Service representative (1947-1972) the original farmers and their sons developed better crops and higher yields with new and efficient agricultural techniques. This is evidenced by the acres of lush green potato fields and modern barns which dot the countryside, a tribute to the pioneering spirit of these hearty Belgian settlers.

Editors Note: Dr. Russell Magnaghi is Associate Professor of History, Northern Michigan University.

HAVE YOU PAID
YOUR DUES YET?

Interview

SUBJECT: St. Nicholas Colony (Delta-Marquette counties)
INTERVIEWEE: Joseph Heirman, 1216 8th Ave South, Escanaba, MI.
INTERVIEWER: Russell M. Magnaghi
DATE: June 10, 1978.

Concerning the Belgian colony near Seney, Heirman recalled that one family in particular, the Jules Van Damme family settled there, found the farming poor and through the urgings of Fr. Mathias Jodocy settled in St. Nicholas.

The name, St. Nicholas came from a community in Belgium.

The first settlers in the area were woodsmen of French Canadian background. In the early part of the century they cleared the virgin timber. By the time the St. Nicholas colony was established a tense second growth was up.

One of the first settlers was Joseph Heirman who had settled in Dickinson County working in the iron mines and then left this job to farm. He came to the area in 1912.

The colony was promoted in Belgium through newspaper ads which did bring people.

Usually the men came first and then once established they sent for their families.

Peter Jodocy was the brother of Fr. M. Jodocy. Peter was the father of Marcel Jodocy a farmer (dairy) in the area.

The Belgians who settled in Norway and worked in the mines created "Belgiantown."

Paul Deden is of Belgian ancestry and lives in Bark River and probably superintendent of the school system.

The Belgians carried on general purpose farming. When the older farmers retired their neighbors usually bought them out and expanded their units. Today there are fewer families because the farms have been consolidated into larger units. The settlers did not bring over any livestock so large Belgian horses were not a feature of the community. The people farming there today are extremely prosperous although they do not erect elaborate structures. In the last 10-15 years they have changed over from strictly dairy farming to potato farming. Joseph Heirman, MSU Extension Service representative in the area gave the farmers tremendous assistance in their operations. Today they produce probably 100 acres of potatoes, which produce 500 bushels to the acre. They take out 50 semitruck loads per season. The Belgian first generation farmers are good operators. Listening to the agricultural experts they used certified seed, pesticides, insecticides, etc.

When they first arrived they lived in whatever was available. The Joseph Heirman family lived in an abandoned logging camp. Others lived in "shacks" which were usually made of tarpaper of anything else which would be four-sided, roofed and would keep them warm. After they got settled they build more substantial

structures. By 1925 the community including the houses and separate barns would have been a scene from Belgium. Although some farmers in the Old Country sometimes attach their barns to the house these people did not do this.

A church was planned and the basement foundations made of poured concrete. A roof was added and for many years a priest from Perkins (St. Joseph's) visited the community on a monthly basis and said Mass. When the church foundation was being poured, a future rectory was also poured. Fr. Jodocy was influential in the construction of this structure whose walls stand along side a stream. The concrete walls were extremely cold during the winter. Around 1918-1920 John Jardin who had married Fr. Jodocy's sister moved to the community from Gladstone and moved into the structure. They established a general store on the premises. Finally the foundation structure was abandoned and today has been filled with earth. The foundation stood to the south of the cemetery.

The Heirman farm stood south of the church.

The culture and traditions were maintained to a degree by the immigrants. The youngsters learned Flemish and the culture. Joseph Heirman understands Flemish but cannot speak it although he did speak it fluently in the past. The immigrants learned English quickly although they spoke with accents. Today one old lady still speaks Belgian. In the 1920's groups met regularly and held dances and picnics to raise money for the church. At these affairs they had accordion music and sang Belgian songs. Many of these people intermarried and the second generation does not know the traditions. The neighbors of the Heirmans are interesting examples of what happened. On one side there was a family with seven youngsters. The five boys all became farmers but this was the exception rather than the rule. On the other side the family had 7-8 youngsters. The three boys became: school teacher, took over the farm when dad died, and United Airlines in San Francisco. The girls usually left with their husbands. For instance some live in Escanaba and their husbands work at Mead Paper. Quite a few are out of the area.

Fr. Jodocy would visit the community. Peter his brother told Joseph Heirman that Mathias had an architectural background and he used some of the expertise in the building of St. John's church.

Cheese factory located near the stream (so that the whey could be thrown out) was developed by outsiders and then was operated as a store by a fellow from Perkins. This creamery was necessary because of horse-drawn transportation. However large cheese factories are more efficient and today the milk is taken to Rock, Perkins and Escanaba. Today the former factory is a private residence.

There was no electricity until 1925.

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Joseph Heirman was born in St, Nicholas and from 1944 until his retirement in 1972. He greatly assisted the first generation and even immigrants develop their prosperous farms. He has written an 8 page study of the community which is deposited with the Delta County Historical Society.

Phone: 786-1840

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World War I caught many of the settlers. Their wives were in Belgium and had to wait out the war. The war also halted immigration which probably hurt the colony as it growth halted.

At its peak the colony had 35 families.