

NEWSLETTER

The Real Story

St. Mary of the Snows Church and Cemetery
Namur, Door County, WI

St. Mary's Parish, dedicated to Our Lady of the Snows, was established at Namur, Door County, Wisconsin, in 1860, and primarily attended by Walloon Belgian immigrants who had begun arriving in northeast Wisconsin in 1853 and in the Door area in 1856. Until St. Mary's was founded, Catholic settlers could attend Mass at the home of Guillaume Delwiche as often as Father Edward Daems could make the trip (on foot) from his Holy Cross parish at Bay Settlement. Baptisms, marriages, and burials of Belgians are also recorded at St. John the Evangelist Church in



Green Bay. Eventually, mission parishes were established at Marchand (Duvall) in 1869; Gardner in 1876; Brussels in 1877; and other nearby Belgian settlements.

The Namur parish grew and the small log cabin church became too small. A second edifice was erected in 1875. That church burned in 1892, but was rebuilt the following year. During those 30 years, priests were not always available as resident pastors. A number of parishioners were being drawn away by an Old Catholic priest, Reverend Joseph Rene Vilatte. To counteract his influence, Bishop Sebastian Messmer of the Green Bay Catholic Diocese requested the Norbertine Order to send priests to take over these rural Belgian-American parishes.

In December of 1893, three members of the Order left Berne Abbey in Holland and made their way to Wisconsin. Here, at St. Mary's, Namur, Father Bernard H. Pennings, Father Lambert Broens, and Brother Servatius Heesakkers began to serve their first parish in this country and thus established the first headquarters of the Norbertine Order in the United States. After five years, Father Pennings moved to DePere where St. Norbert Abbey was founded. The White Fathers (Norbertines) continued their service at Namur, however, until 1986.

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First Club Meeting of the Year!
Thursday, May 19th at 7:00pm

The Real Story

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On that list of pastors at St. Mary's was Reverend John Anthony Righino, O. Praem., who came in 1962. He was fluent in six foreign languages and learned Walloon ("Belgian") while service at St. Joseph parish in Champion and at St. Mary's. He was thought at times to be stern, but he directed the parishioners to work together to accomplish goals for this church. During his tenure, floors and roofs were installed in the church and rectory and an entryway was built to enclose the front steps of the church. The old schoolhouse was moved to adjacent property and is now the home of the Peninsula Belgian-American Club. The old driveway and gravel parking in front of the church were leveled and blacktopped.

As with most rural churches, burials of the deceased members took place on the parish grounds. By 1911, space at St. Mary's had been used up and a new cemetery was established on Pit Road, off old Highway 57 (now County Hwy DK), a short distance from the church. The disarray of old gravemarkers at the original site prompted Father Righino to have all remaining markers removed to a smaller plot at the north end of the cemetery. The stones were cemented in, side-by-side in four rows. Contrary to some erroneous published stories, the graves themselves were not disturbed, nor were any gravesites covered by the parking lot. Conversations with long-time parishioners and consultation of the St. Norbert Abbey Archives concurs with this statement.

In 1977 when gravemarkers at both cemeteries were indexed, it was found that the earliest marker in the old cemetery was dated 1865, and, surprisingly, not for a Belgian, but for a William Moore who had been born in 1818. His wife and son were also buried there, in 1899 and 1904, respectively. Another surprise is that fifteen burials took place in 1906. It seems a high number for a small community, and one wonders if there was an epidemic of some sort that year. The "latest" gravemarkers there is for Francois Dubois who died February 13, 1911. Thus, it has been determined that the location change took place early that year.

With most of his goals accomplished, Father Righino was still pastor of St. Mary's when he became ill and died on April 28, 1971. Three other Norbertines succeeded him, the last being Rev. Mel Wigman who served from 1976 until 1986, when Diocesan priests took over as Pastors.

St. Mary of the Snows was merged with St. Francis Parish at Brussels in 1993, and the St. Mary's church building was decommissioned in 2001. Over a century of service to the primarily Belgian community is not forgotten, nor are those pioneer settlers whom gravemarkers are solidly together and whose souls are still resting in peace beneath the green sod at their original resting places. Requiescat in pace!

Researched and Written by Mary Ann Defnet
PBAC Member Since 1976
August 12, 2010

References: "History of the Catholic Church in Wisconsin"; "The Archconfraternity of St. Joseph and The Norbertine Order"; St. Norbert Abbey Archives; Gravestone readings from old St. Mary of the Snows cemetery and from new St. Mary of the Snows cemetery, 1977, by Beverly Diefenbach and Judy Srnka; Parish history of St. Mary of the Snows, 1991; Conversations with parish members and personal observance.



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"Peninsula Belgian American Club"

Mark Your Calendar

Thursday, May 19, 2011

PBAC First Meeting of the Year

July 8-10, 2011

50th Belgian Days & Heritage Tour (7/9)

July 11-23, 2011

Wallonie WI Society Members in Wisconsin