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Red Brick Houses and White Roadside Chapels.
Belgian Immigrant Architecture in Door County,
Wisconsin and Lyon County, Minnesota

Driving through southern Door County in the northeastern part of the American state of Wisconsin is like driving through rural Belgium. The attention of the occasional passerby is caught by a for America rather unfamiliar architectural landscape. Red brick houses, white roadside chapels and outdoor baking ovens are a common sight in this gently rolling landscape, bordered on one side by the Green Bay and on the other by Lake Michigan, and visited by thousands of tourists every summer.

A Belgian eye will immediately detect the similarity between the local architecture in southern Door County and most of the older edifices in Belgium. The common architectural traits between Belgium and southern Door County are not a mere coincidence, but the result of the presence of the same people who inhabited both areas: Walloon Belgians. The Belgian settlers of Door County left a remarkable and durable imprint on its landscape. The Walloon architectural relics are among the best preserved permanent remnants of the Belgian presence in the United States. Between 1820 and 1970 more than 200.000 Belgians settled in the United States of America.¹ Prior to and till right after World War I the majority of the Belgian settlers were Flemings, coming from the northern half of Belgium. By the 1930s, the number of Walloon immigrants, coming from the French speaking southern part of Belgium, increased. Most of the Belgian immigrants started their new transatlantic life in the states of the Midwest: Illinois (Moline and Chicago), Indiana (South Bend and Mishawaka), Wisconsin (Door County), Minnesota (Lyon County), and Michigan (Detroit).² Smaller groups settled in Massachusetts (Woonsocket)³ and Texas (San Antonio).



Figure 1.

Baudhuin House. Namur, Door County, 1871. Red brick, with a bull's eye or circular window high on the gable, and arch type brick work over the windows.

This paper focuses on two representative Belgian colonies. The first one is situated in southern Door County and northern Kewaunee County, Wisconsin, to the northeast of the city of Green Bay. The colony was founded in the mid 1850s by Walloons from the provinces of Brabant, Namur and Hainaut.⁴ The Belgian settlement comprises localities as Brussels, Namur, and Rosiere in southern Door County, and Dykesville, Thiry Daems and Tonet in northern Kewaunee County. The second Belgian colony dealt with in this paper lies in northern Lyon County, in southwestern Minnesota, near the border with South Dakota and in the immediate vicinity of Laura Ingalls's Little House on the Prairie. The towns of Marshall and Ghent are the main centres of the Belgian presence in Lyon County. This settlement was founded in the early 1880s by Flemings coming from the provinces of Oost- and West-Vlaanderen. The initiative to found a Catholic nucleus in southwestern Minnesota came from John Ireland, bishop and later archbishop of St. Paul, Minnesota.⁵

Door County, Wisconsin, and Lyon County, Minnesota are two counties where the Belgians were one of the leading ethnic immigrant groups. In such an environment they managed to retain their cultural identity much better than in areas where the Belgians were but a mere dot on the map of ethnic diversity. Ethnic groups can express their cultural identity in a variety of ways. The most visible one is through the construction of civil and religious edifices, such as houses, schools, churches, chapels, and cemeteries. What makes southern Door County so special is the omnipresence of Belgian architectural relics in the landscape. Lyon County, on the contrary, excels in the near total absence of typical Belgian architecture. Most houses in southern Door County were built after the great fire, the so-called Peshtigo Fire, which, in 1871, destroyed a great part of the Door County peninsula's earliest buildings and left hundreds of settlers dead. Wood was still widely used after 1871, but mostly for barns and other outdoor buildings. Most Belgians switched to the fire and weather resistant brick for the construction of their houses. By using red bricks the Walloons may have wanted to link America, their new home, with their experiences in Belgium, the old country.

Belgian houses, the oldest one dates from 1872, are log struc-



Figure 2.

Belgian house in Union Township, Door County. Quoins, star and other ornaments built of cream-coloured bricks. Note the intricate masonry. Local dolomite forms the foundation of this house.

tures, chinked with clay or mud, and then covered with red or cream-coloured brick. Only a couple of houses have elaborate white trim on the outside such as front porches. All other ethnic groups in the area, such as the Scandinavians to the north of the Belgian settlement, and the settlers of Anglo-Saxon origin, continued to use wood even after 1872. Non-Belgian houses in Door County are predominantly frame and clapboard constructions that have their stylistic antecedents in New England.

A characteristic of Belgian house building in Door County is the arch type brick work over doors and windows. Some of the older Belgian houses have a circular (bull's eye) or semi-circular window high in the gable facing the road, surrounded by a specific brick pattern. In southern Door County only a few bull's eyes are known to exist. Half circular windows appear to have been more popular with the Belgians.⁶ Sometimes cream-coloured brick, the so-called cream-city brick imported from Milwaukee, was used for the arches over windows and doors, the typical brick pattern surrounding bull's eyes or a semi circular windows, and the quoins.

Most Belgian houses are rather small and rectangular in shape. The ground floor usually contained a pantry, one or two bedrooms, a kitchen of considerable size and a parlour. The second floor houses several bedrooms.

Belgian houses in the Flemish settlement of northern Lyon County in southwest Minnesota do not differ in any aspect from the houses of the other ethnic groups in the area. They are frame or clapboard constructions, painted white, grey or some other colour. The Flemings in and around Ghent were not the first to settle the area. Consequently, the Belgians adopted the existing architectural customs. Besides, the clay found in Lyon County was not suitable for making bricks.

The outdoor baking ovens are another typical Belgian architectural element in Door County. Although they are not a Belgian monopoly in the USA, distinctively Belgian is the fact that the outdoor oven shares a common gable wall with and is attached to the summer kitchen.⁷ The summer kitchen is generally located a couple of steps away from the backdoor of the house. Access to the oven is gained through the summer kitchen.

The outdoor oven is generally built on a platform of local

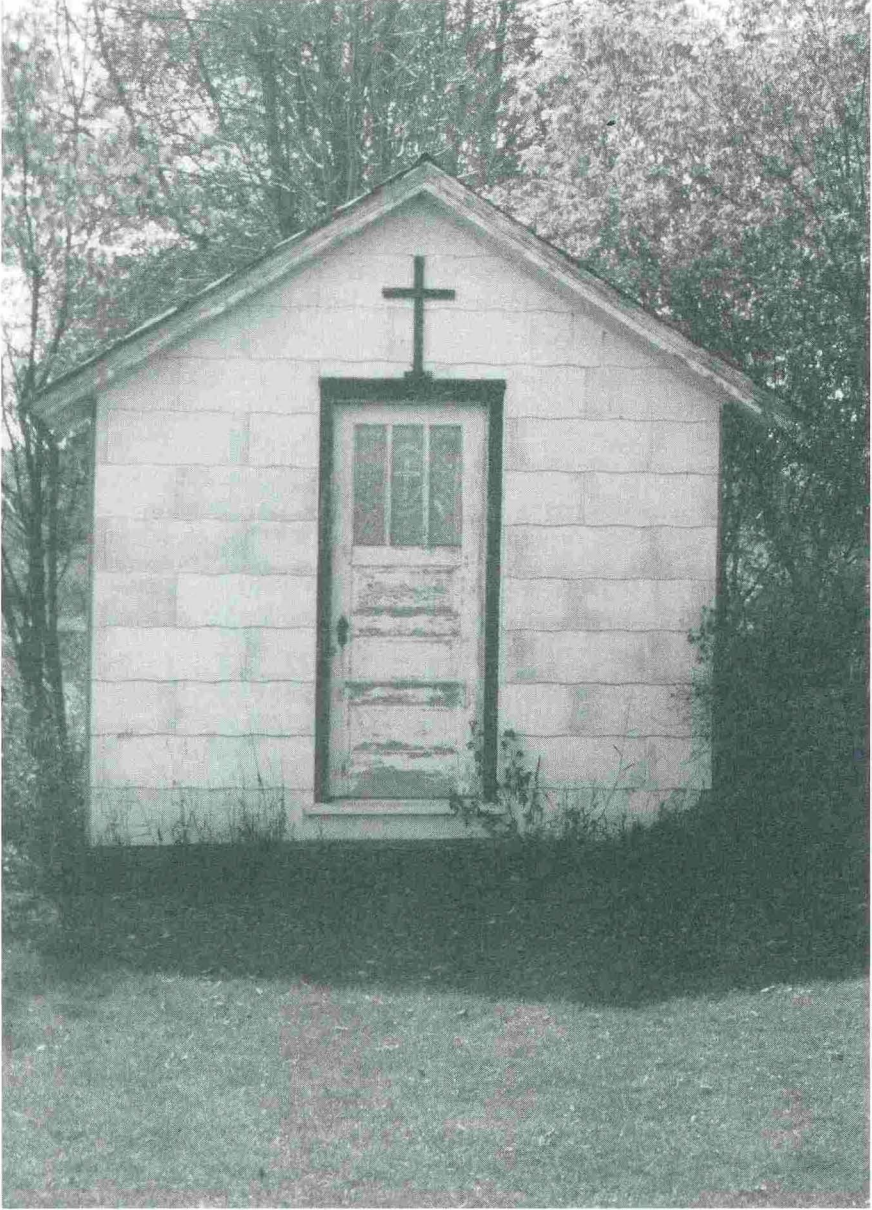


Figure 3.

Baudhuin Chapel, Brussels Township, Door County. Built in the 1880s and dedicated to Saint Mary.

Niagara dolomite. "The oven was oval, resembling the shape of an egg that has been halved lengthwise and laid flat side down on the platform."⁸ The oval domed baking chamber is built in brick, made of local clay, or in local limestone, which was cheaper than brick and more readily available. "The interior of the oval-domed baking chamber measured 2 feet at the highest part, 4.33 feet wide, and 5.75 feet deep or long. A small door (approximately 20 inches square) located 28 inches above the kitchen floor level provided access to the oven."⁹ This Walloon-Belgian type of oven differs fundamentally from the ovens built by other European groups such as the Flemish-Belgians, the Scandinavians, the French, and so on, who incorporated the oven into the interior of the kitchen. A wood fire was lit in the oven until the bricks became red hot. The ashes were then removed, and as many as twenty-four loaves of bread were baked in the hearth at one time. After finishing the baking of bread, the residual heat was used to bake pies. Most outdoor ovens, of which eighteen were located in a study dating from 1979,¹⁰ are no longer in use and are disappearing rapidly from the landscape.

Roadside or wayside chapels are also part of the Belgian cultural heritage in southern Door County, which is one of the very few areas in the United States where such chapels are a common appearance along the roads. Originally Door County and adjacent Kewaunee County counted at least eighteen chapels.¹¹ They were built by Walloon families between the second half of the 19th and the early decades of the 20th century. Examples are the Destrée chapel (around 1870) dedicated to St. Odile, the Pauline Baudhuin chapel (1880s) in honour of the Blessed Mother, the Vandertie chapel (around 1900) and consecrated to St. Ghislain (patron saint of the small children) and the Jadin chapel (about 1915) to honour St. Roch.

In the pioneer period of the Belgian presence in Door County, the 1850s through the 1870s, transportation in Door County occurred on foot, if not on horseback or horse-drawn carriage. Only every three to four miles there was a Catholic Church and priests were rare. Lack of transportation and the long distances meant that the devout Belgian settlers were not able to go to Church as often as they wanted to. The chapels that were built along the roads were thus used as a place for regular worship,

when going to Church was difficult or impossible, for instance after heavy snowfall.¹²

The votive chapels are dedicated to various saints or the Blessed Virgin for all sorts of favours granted through their assistance. The most famous Belgian chapel in the area is consecrated to Our Lady of Good Help (Notre Dame de Bon Secours) in Champion, Brown County, which is situated to the southwest of Door County. It was erected to commemorate the appearance in 1859 of Our Lady to a Walloon girl in the forests of the Door County peninsula. In the 1860s a monastery and Catholic school were built in the vicinity of the chapel.¹³

Most commonly, the chapels are frame constructions, sided with either clapboard or composition shingles. Less frequently, local dolomite was used. Inside walls and ceilings were finished with lath and plaster or wallboard, usually painted blue or white. Most chapels have no windows, except for one small window in the door. A wooden or metal cross stands just above the door or on the top of the gable facing the road. Some roadside chapels carry inscriptions in French such as "Notre Dame de Secours, priez pour nous," testimony to the people who built them.

The chapels are rather small, ranging from 4 or 5 feet to 8 or 10 feet. Usually they contain simple home made altars, and now and then a prayer bench. On the altar are religious figures (the Blessed Virgin, a crucifix, or one or the other saint), candlesticks, vases, and sacred ornaments on display. Plastic or silk flowers ornate the altars. The walls are often covered with pictures, showing popular saints, Saint Joseph or the Blessed Virgin, and certificates of marriage, birth or death.¹⁴ Most of the time, the doors of the chapels are open, so every worshipper can just step in for a moment of reflection.

Some of the chapels are falling in disrepair as the families that erected, owned or took care of them are no longer around and as their present day religious function no longer coincides with the goal they were built for some eighty, ninety, hundred or even more years ago. It cannot be excluded that most chapels will be gone in ten to twenty years.

The Flemish community in Lyon County, Minnesota, never erected very many roadside chapels. The few that existed have been torn down during the last couple of years. The Belgians in

and around Ghent had much less need for wayside chapels than did their peers in Door County, Wisconsin. When the Flemish started to immigrate in the early 1880s, there already were a couple of Catholic churches in northern Lyon County. What is more, one of the first groups of Belgians to settle in the Ghent area was accompanied by Father Jules Emile De Vos, a native priest from Belgium, who founded the local St. Eloi church and served the Flemish community. To my knowledge, there are no rectangular chapel buildings left in Lyon County which can be compared to the religious edifices found all over Door County. However, when entering Ghent from nearby Marshall one finds on the right hand side a small building that has all the characteristics of a chapel, including a cross on top of a small steeple, but actually is not one. The red and white wooden construction, owned by a Flemish-American, was bought from a Norwegian who used it as a gasoline station. The new Belgian owner added the steeple and put the cross on top of it. However, it never served as a chapel and is nowadays used for storage.

In Door County as well as in Lyon County many front yards of Belgian owned houses have a statue of the Blessed Virgin on the lawn. Most often, the statue is placed in small alcoves (sometimes even half bathtubs), some in small replicas of the Lourdes-grotto, while others just stand in open air.

Most Belgian churches in Door County and the adjacent counties are disappearing rapidly. The lack of priests, the decline of the population of the Belgian rural settlements and the decay of the church buildings themselves are to blame for this unfortunate evolution. The churches are not only closed, but even torn down, as the Catholic diocese of Green Bay does not want the edifices to be bought by other religious denominations. The inner ornamentation of the churches, like the stained windows and benches are auctioned or sold. St. Michael's, of the Brussels Township, built in 1875 and therefore the oldest Belgian Catholic church in southern Door County, was torn down in 1976. In the fall of 1992 the Belgian church in Thiry Daems (Kewaunee County) was closed and is probably bound to disappear. Others are on the deathlist. With the destruction of the churches goes one of the most important elements that make up an ethnic community: the church as a focal point of religious and social

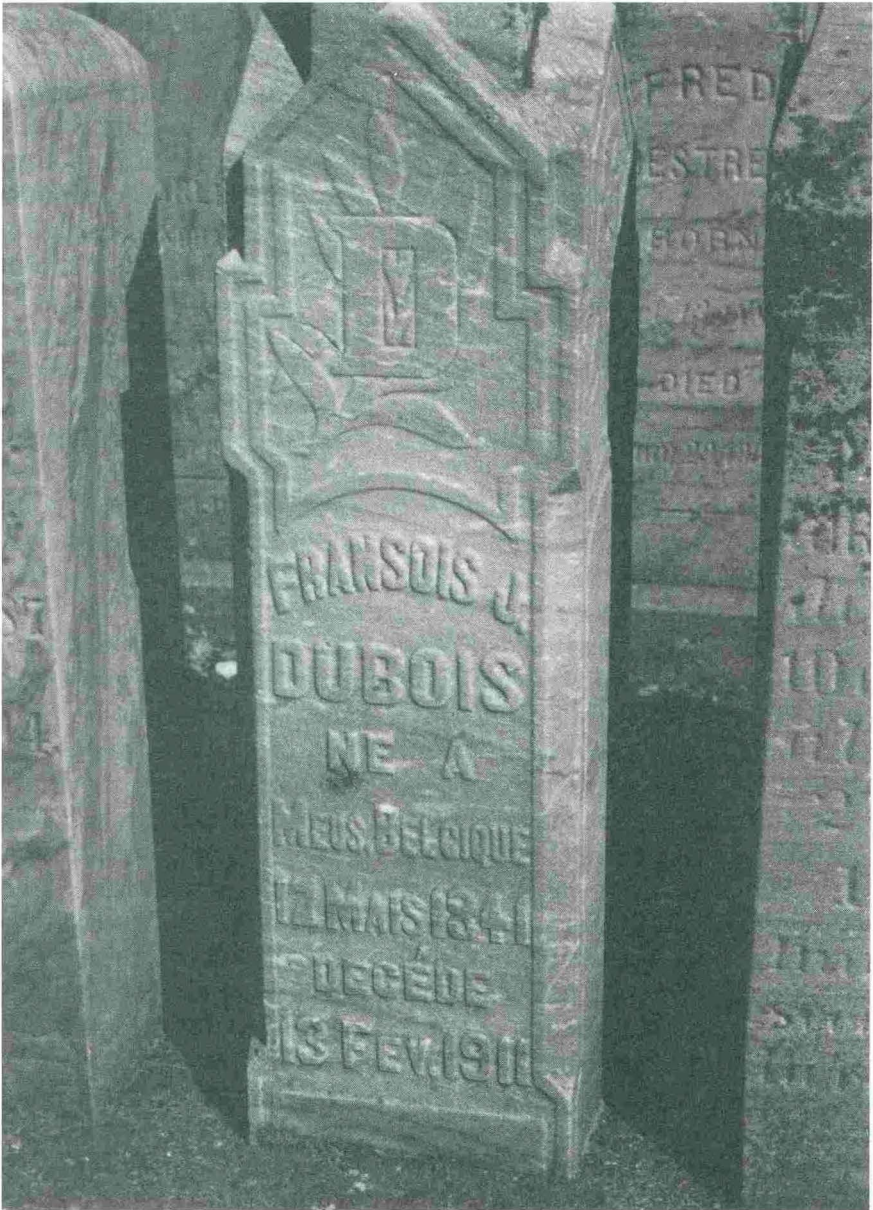


Figure 4.

Belgian cemetery St.Mary of the Snows, Namur, Door County. Tombstone of an early Belgian settler with French inscriptions.

life. Among the Walloon community in southern Door County anger exists that the churches their forefathers had built at the cost of so much effort and money are now disappearing at a rapid pace. Parishioners of Belgian origin do not agree with the policy of the diocese of Green Bay in selling off all ornamentation and the plot of land the church is standing on. They especially object to the fact that the diocese keeps the money instead of dividing it between the parishioners who put all their money into the upkeep of the religious edifice and the running of the parish.

The Walloons even left their imprint on most of the headstones or tombstones of the Catholic cemeteries in southern Door County. The Belgians, who had a strong sense of their cultural heritage, put evidence of their ethnic origin on the headstones. The older Belgian tombstones on the cemeteries of Namur and Brussels carry inscriptions in French, the mother tongue of the Walloon settlers of the Door County peninsula. Moreover, the Belgians in the area were and are the sole ethnic group to put a photograph of the deceased on the tombstone, a custom still existing in Belgium. However, not all Belgians in Door County did or do so.

Contrary to the prevalent custom in the United States, some of the Belgian cemeteries in Door County, such as St. Mary of the Snows in Namur and St. Francis Xavier in Brussels are located in the immediate vicinity of the Church. The cemetery of St. Mary of the Snows ceased to function as such in 1970, when the parish priest decided to follow the mores of his time and converted the old cemetery in to a parking space. Without much advance notice, he had the tombstones removed somewhat north to the church. All the stones were placed in rows, just a couple of inches apart. The bodies were left untouched and were covered with an asphalt parking lot. The parishioners were rather angry, but had to content themselves with the new cemetery, a distance away from the church.

With the exception of the photographs and French inscriptions, the Belgian community in southern Door County followed the existing customs as far as type and size of the tombstones are concerned.

The Catholic cemeteries of Ghent and Marshall in northern Lyon County no longer contain any tombstones with inscriptions



Figure 5.

Belgian cemetery St.Mary of the Snows, Namur, Door County. A picture of the deceased on the headstone is quite common among the Walloon Belgian settlers in Door County.

in either French or Dutch. However, many of the older tombstones have been removed from the cemeteries. Hardly any of the remaining older or more recent stones carry references to the old country, though one, dating from 1992, explicitly states that both husband (Devlaminck) and wife (Martens) were born in "Hulste, Belgium" and "Bocholt, Belgium." The custom of placing photographs of the deceased on the tombstone is entirely absent among the Belgians in Lyon County. The brand-new tombstone of the Flemish Van Leeuwe family on the St. Eloi Catholic Cemetery of Ghent rather features an exact picture of their farm, including silos, farm buildings, fences, and animals, chiselled out in the marble. It is proof of the pride the Belgian farmers of Lyon County take in being such successful farmers.¹⁵

Logbarns are the last typical Belgian feature in the cultural landscape in southern Door County, and more specifically in and around the towns of Brussels, Namur, and Rosiere. Typical Belgian logbarns are built of horizontally placed logs usually left unchinked "in the not entirely erroneous belief that animals needed fresh air to prevent sickness. Belgian barns may be double or even triple barns with centre doorways through which wagons could be driven. Feed could be pitched into a cattle barn on one side, and a horse barn on the other side."¹⁶ Non-Belgian barns have a frame of horizontally placed logs, hidden behind or covered by vertically placed planks. Quite often, those barns rest on a stone foundation standing one meter and more above the ground. Most Belgian log-barn builders used the square-corner notching or the fully dovetailed notching in order to keep the logs together at the four corners of the barn. V-corner or double-corner notching are fairly rare in the Belgian area of southern Door County.¹⁷ The gable roof is the most common type of roof on Belgian logbarns in southern Door County. The Dutch or English gambrel roof were not used by Belgians in Door County.¹⁸ Nowadays many of these barns are still in use throughout the Belgian community though not necessarily for the purposes they were built for.

To conclude, the Walloon Belgians in Wisconsin's Door County left a remarkable architectural heritage. Proof of their presence is imprinted on the landscape in which the red brick houses and the numerous roadside chapels are the most distinc-

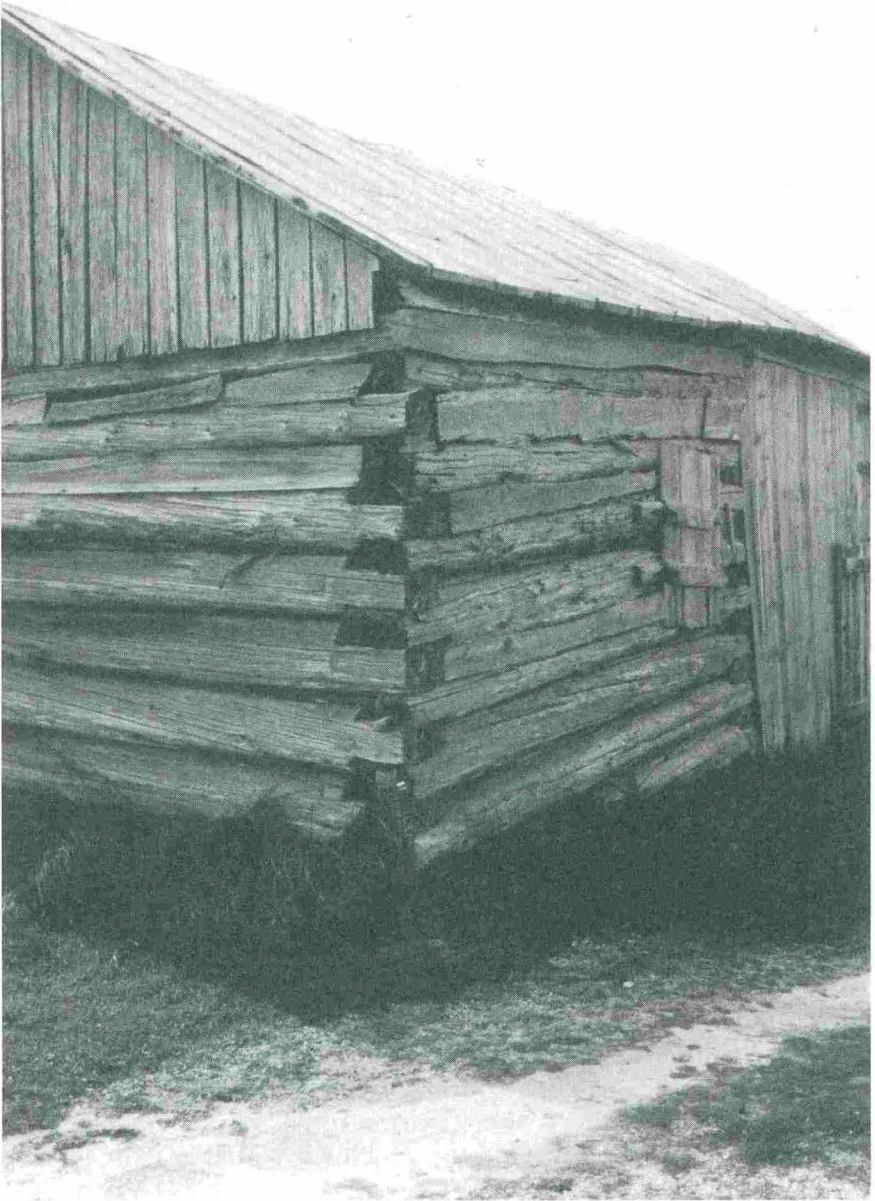


Figure 6.

Belgian barn in Red River Township, Door County. Note the square corner notching and the horizontally placed logs.

tive Belgian architectural remnants.

Lyon County, Minnesota, however, hardly houses any typical Belgian constructions. Contrary to the Door County Walloons, the Flemings in and around Ghent and Marshall were not the first to settle the area, so they much more imitated the existing methods of house and barn building. It took the Lyon County Belgians also much longer to establish their dominant position than it did the Belgians on the Door County peninsula. Belgian immigration into Lyon County lasted from the early 1880s till right after the Second World War. The Walloon settling of Door County began in the 1850s and was nearly finished by the outbreak of the American Civil War. In just a couple of years thousands of Walloons descended on a till then totally unsettled and virgin southern Door County. This being so, the Walloons had a much greater opportunity to leave their architectural imprint on the landscape than did their peers in Minnesota's Lyon County.

Besides, a natural catastrophe, the so called Peshtigo Fire which devastated most of the Door County peninsula in 1871, prompted the Belgians to use fireproof and more durable brick instead of wood as the principal basic material for building their houses. Without the fire the landscape in southern Door County would perhaps never have been dotted with its typical red brick Belgian houses, and would have resembled any other rural county in northeastern Wisconsin.

However, as Belgian communities all over the United States disintegrate, especially the Walloon ones of Door County and Kewaunee County, the architectural remnants of the Belgian presence in the area are rapidly disappearing, despite the greater durability of brick houses compared to frame and clapboard constructions. Chapels and churches are being torn down, and the typical red brick house is being adapted to the needs of 20th century living. The only typical Belgian architectural landscape in the United States is thus being threatened in its survival.

Part of the Walloon inheritance will, however, survive in Heritage Hill State Park in the nearby city of Green Bay. The Park houses a replica of a Belgian farmstead, anno 1890, including a brick house, a log barn, a summer kitchen with outdoor oven, and a chapel. The farm's presence in the Heritage Hill State Park is the best recognition the Walloon-Belgian community of the

Door County peninsula could get for the significant role they have played in the settlement and development of northeastern Wisconsin.

Notes

1. P. H. Laurent, "Belgians," *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, ed. Stephan Thernstrom (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986) 179-181.
2. Robert Houthaeve, *Camille Cools en zijn Gazette van Detroit. Beroemde Vlamingen in Noord-Amerika* (Moorslede: R. Houthaeve, 1989).
3. Gary Gerstle, *Working Class Americanism. The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) deals among others with the union activities of the large Walloon settlement in the textile town of Woonsocket, Massachusetts.
4. Mary A. Defnet, Jean Ducat, Thierry Eggerickx and Michel Poulain, *From Grez-Doiceau to Wisconsin. Contribution à l'étude de l'émigration wallonne vers les Etats-Unis d'Amérique au XIXème siècle* (Brussels: De Boeck-Wesemael, 1986). Hjalmar R. Holand, *Wisconsin's Belgian Community: An Account of the Early Events in the Belgian Settlement in Northeastern Wisconsin, With Particular Reference to the Belgians in Door County* (Sturgeon Bay, 1933). Françoise Lempereur, *Les Wallons d'Amérique du Nord. Etude principalement consacrée aux Wallons établis au Wisconsin* (Gembloux: Duculot, 1976). Lester F. and Jeanne M. Rentmeester, *The Flemish in Wisconsin* (1985).
5. Joseph A. Amato, *Servants of the Land. God, Family, and Farm. The Trinity of Belgian Economic Folkways in Southwestern Minnesota* (Marshall: Crossings Press, 1990). Louis M. De Gryse, "The Low Countries," *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of The State's Ethnic Groups*, ed. June Drenning Holmquist (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1981) 185-210. Carl Pansaerts, "Big Barns and Small Houses: A Study of the Flemish-Belgians in a Rural County. Lyon County, Minnesota, 1880s-1940s," diss. MA, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, 1989. Carl Pansaerts, "Een stukje Vlaanderen op de prairies. I: De origine van de Vlaamse nederzetting in en rond Ghent," *Acco Aktueel* Febr. 1990: 21-23; "II: Big Barns and Small Houses," *Acco Aktueel* June 1990: 32-36.
6. John Kahlert, *Early Door County Buildings and the People Who Built Them, 1849-1910* (Baileys Harbor: Meadow Lane Publishers, 1978): 62.
7. Charles F. Calkins and William G. Laatsch, "The Belgian Outdoor Ovens of Northeastern Wisconsin," *Pioneer America Society Transactions* 2 (1979): 2.
8. Calkins 2.
9. Calkins 4.
10. Calkins 7.
11. Kahlert 111.
12. Kahlert 111.
13. Sister M. Dominica, *The Chapel. Our Lady of Good Help. A Shrine of Mary on*

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- the Green Bay Peninsula* (Green Bay: n.p., 1981): 32.
14. Kahlert 111-113.
 15. Professor Joseph A. Amato speaks of the Trinity of God, family, and farm as the most important elements in the life and the success of the Belgians in Lyon County (47-50).
 16. Kahlert 139.
 17. Kahlert 11-14.
 18. In a gable roof construction two planes the length of the barn meet at the top. "A gambrel roof is composed of four planes the length of the building. The two planes at the top or centre have a slight pitch, the side planes are wider and steeper. Occasionally there are additional planes that flare out at the eaves. If there are four planes the barn is said to have an English gambrel roof; six planes make it a Dutch gambrel design. The principal advantage of a gambrel roof is that more space is made available for hay storage. A person can walk upright anywhere under the eaves" (Kahlert 142-144).