

## The Belgians in the North Country

By LEE W. MITZNER

WE ARE living in troubled times. Our concepts of liberty and freedom and peace, the things that spell America to us, are more than threatened. It seems appropriate then that we meet here to consecrate the memories of our pioneers. They made our privileges possible and, as Lincoln said, "We should dedicate our lives today to a successful completion of this task before us." To do this we will need strength and courage, and I know no better inspiration than in the history of our forebears.

To me was allotted the story of the Belgians, a friendly, simple people—my neighbors. Out of the wilderness of northeastern Wisconsin they carved a farm paradise and they did it the hard way. Without money, with no credit and no governmental subsidies they created an empire of fertile farms and comfortable homes. When they bade their adieu to the homeland, they burned their bridges behind them. They knew that survival depended upon their own efforts and a kindly Providence; and knowing that, stouthearted, strong-limbed, and with a blind faith, 15,000 of them chose to leave their homes in 1855 to 1858 to test their metal in what was then a raw frontier. They came from a country known throughout history as the cockpit of Europe; a country fashioned by greed and jealousy to be the buffer state between two perennially warring powers—France and Germany.

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LEE W. MITZNER, president of the Bank of Casso in Casso, Wisconsin, knows that he is only "a country banker who happens to have a friendly interest in his neighbors." But those who heard him read this paper at the Convention of the WISCONSIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY at Green Bay on August 25, 1942, already appreciate his outstanding gift for narrative. May we also recommend his "The First Kinross" in the June, 1931, issue of this Magazine? We consider it one of the most delightful contributions published in the Magazine's first quarter century.

It was a country condemned by powerful neighbors to perpetual neutrality and which, as a result, was invaded regularly with impunity. In spite of this, the Belgians show few warlike traits. Their glory lies in peaceful pursuits. Do not misunderstand me! They have shown sublime courage on occasion and made unexampled sacrifices in defense of their homeland. That, too, in the face of hopeless odds.

Belgium is a little country as *hard arts* goes. If you draw a triangle on the map of Wisconsin, using a line between Eau Claire and Milwaukee for the base and Green Bay as its apex, you have an overall foundation for the entire province of Belgium. Now put in 5,000,000 people, mostly farm owners, and you have, in modern parlance, an "economic headache." That was Belgium in 1853. It is Belgium today, maybe worse. She is a mixture of two distinct races, Flemish, who are of Teutonic extraction, and Walloons, whose forebears were Romanized Gauls. They had everything in the homeland—freedom of religion, good schools, a liberal government—everything but the means or the wherewithal to enjoy these privileges.

Farms were mere garden plots. Forty-eight per cent of them were from two and one-half up to thirty acres in extent. The inhabitants managed by a careful, intensive agriculture, combined with industrial employment, such as spinning and weaving, to eke out a subsistence. Then came the invention of the spinning jenny or power loom and an industrial revolution that spelled pauperism for all but the most favored. I have heard from the emigrants themselves what that poverty meant. Wheeling potatoes for miles to an indifferent market, in homemade wheelbarrows on dirt roads; going barefoot or in wooden shoes; rags—cold—the endless agony of hunger. It meant sewing a horn in your petticoat so that you could steal grain from the landlord. It meant slow physical, mental, and spiritual stagnation. The stage was set—all that was required was the inspiration.

I have noticed an interesting concurrence by all historians in speaking of the Belgians. After each fresh disaster, war or plague

or depression, they conclude, "Belgium soon recovered." In our own state in 1871 a devastating forest fire burned a swath six miles wide and sixty miles long. It overran the entire Belgian settlement, away up to Little Saugeen, leaving 3,600 homeless people to face a northern winter. Xavier Martin in his article, "The Belgians of Northeastern Wisconsin," describes the holocaust. But what the people did, how they met the winter, whether they had any help or not, Martin does not say. I suppose it is the greater tribute that this Belgian, writing of his countrymen, simply says, "By 1874 they were completely reestablished." I can see him shrug his shoulders in true Gallic style and hear him say, "Bien! C'est ça."

I like to picture the simple incident that was to have such a far reaching effect on the future history of Wisconsin. Springtime in 1853. François Petinck, a peasant up from Brabant, was spending the day in Antwerp. No doubt, disconsolate from an effort to obtain work, he had repaired to a tavern to rest. He sat drowsily now, glad to stretch his legs that ached from unaccustomed contact with unyielding cobblestones. To beguile the time he exercised his limited knowledge of the Dutch language, scanning the pages of a pamphlet he had picked up at his table. It was a story about a country called America. It recited the experiences of some Hollanders in a vague place, far inland, called Wisconsin. First idly—and then as his starved imagination kindled at the description—feverishly, he absorbed the details. Land—fertile land—land that stretched away to all horizons—vacant land just begging for settlement. Forests—endless, unbroken solitudes—with tall trees whose vaulted tops imprisoned the stars— inexhaustible. Blue skies—sparkling lakes and rivers—and all teeming with game and fish and wild fruits and berries. And—*Now Dieu!* was it possible—to be had at from 50 cents to \$1.25 an acre. François made a rapid mental calculation, and the result was bewildering. It bordered on the fantastic! His 5 acres in the Commune of Grez Doiceau would add up to 500 acres in America! That was in March, 1853.

In August of the same year, Perinot and nine other intrepid neighbors and their families were bound for America. Copies of the pamphlet had found their way around Europe, and on the ship were other eager emigrants, Dutch and Belgian, headed for Wisconsin. In that spirit of kinship that springs out of a common experience they decided to band together in the new land. The Hollanders intended to settle in the vicinity of Sheboygan, so the Belgians trailed along. But they found the good lands gone when they got there. Then, too, the language was strange and, when a Canadian trapper passing through told them about "La Baye Verte" and its French-speaking population, the Belgians took passage on a lake steamer north.

Green Bay subsequently became the Mecca for all Wisconsin-bound Belgians. It was a trading post on the edge of Wisconsin's last frontier. A bustling, polyglot settlement of approximately 1,500 people, it sprawled for a mile and a half along the Fox River. There could be no better way to date this period in its history than to read the prosaic report of the collector of customs for the June quarter in 1853: total receipts, \$140,000, and of this amount, fish accounted for \$86,000, lumber \$35,000, furs \$19,000, and grain \$102.81. There were two mighty financial fortresses in the town, the Fox River Bank with deposits of \$15,551 and the Northern Bank with \$39,000. Darling and Company advertised that they, too, dealt in gold, silver, and uncurrent money. I mention this latter because our Belgian friends learned later, at serious cost to themselves, what that term "uncurrent" meant. When the first small patch was cleared and the wheat was scratched in with a grub hoe, men often walked to Milwaukee or Chicago to earn a little extra money before harvest time. With Old World frugality they brought back the bulk of their season's pay by check. Often they found later that the check was either worthless or, in bank language, not negotiable, or subject to an exorbitant and often lawless discount.

Baron S. Dory was asking for prices on tracts of 1,000 to 10,000 acres in Brown, Door, and Kewaunee counties "for settlement on

behalf of industrious Belgians, Finnish and Hollanders who are about forming associations with the object of emigrating to this country and establishing agricultural settlements and villages." Sealed proposals were being asked on a plank road to Kaukauna, planks to be of white pine or oak. So cosmopolitan had the metropolis become that ye editor of the *Green Bay Advocate* was already bemoaning the days of yesteryear. Like a baying hound he lamented:

Such moonlight nights as we are having now defy all description. The hard beaten roads, the clear weather and the grand moonlight make such sleigh riding as it is by no means neglected by the young folks here away. It carries us back to those boyish days and that lumber sleigh and that Ridge road. And there were pretty girls in those days with red cheeks and calico dresses. But today—in their stead are pale and starchy maidens whose hoop'd skirts would clothe half a dozen girls of yore. Alas and Alackaday.

We could weep that these are gone, did not the same glorious moon, the same splendid roads, and the same grand nights come back every year unchanged. Was it not Voltaire who said, "The more things change, the more they remain the same."

A survey for a site was made, and land about Kaukauna drew first choice. Here again blind chance or some inscrutable plan of Providence intervened. The death of a child in the party changed their plans. There was the delay of a day for the burial—just long enough for the arrival of Father Daems, a Belgian missionary serving the frontier northeast of Green Bay. The great majority of Belgians are Catholic. Under the trusted leadership of this spirited, able pastor, they were easily influenced. Father Daems had the pioneer vision himself. He knew the trails and the country intimately, and the first Belgian settlement in Wisconsin became reality. *Aux Premiers Belges*, it was christened, and Robinsonville is its name today.

Much has been said and written about the hardships endured by our pioneers. One of them was the interminable ocean voyage to a people unaccustomed to travel and fearful of the water besides. But that was only one phase of it. I have the copy of a

steership ticket issued in 1858. It was possibly a luxury liner of its time. It contains these regulations:

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.

And after eating salt pork and salt herring daily for forty-eight days, I consider this last the master stroke:

The ship's master has the right to withhold water rations until the promenade deck has been swept and cleaned each day by passengers.

After the water voyage came the long treks through woods trails—on foot and with burdensome loads. A great-grandmother told me:

We left Green Bay before sun-up. We were told that a five-hour walk would bring us to Monsieur Perijohn, the baker. That would be about where Walkala is today. From there it is two hours to a river, and then a good half hour farther you come to a creek. By the creek is a big hill. There you turn north, and then it's two hours walk to Grantville. We reached the creek and the hill and we said, "Let's rest first." We threw off our packs and we were so tired and homesick that we weren't hungry, so we all sat down and cried. Then we felt better and after we ate, and drank some creek water, we started walking north. We found the clearing late in the evening and we were happy to be with our menfolk again. They laughed at us for being such children when we told them how we sat on the hill and cried. After that the hill was a landmark with a name. We called it "Tien de Broy," the "Hill of Weeping." You call it "Cain's Hill" at the overhead in Casco.

There was the struggle to clear land and to build a habitation before winter came. These early pioneers often miscalculated and paid the resultant penalty. The climate of Wisconsin runs to greater extremes than Belgium's, and of those early settlers the *Advocate* says:

Information was received here last week that a party of Belgian emigrants located near the bay shore in Red River were in a suffering condition for want of provisions. Wholly unused to provide for a northern winter, their houses or huts are entirely unfit to protect them from the cold, being roughly built of logs and brush, the cracks and crevices of which are so open as to admit the wind freely. Besides the

hunger of starvation, they have to face the danger of death by freezing. Many of the men have already frozen their hands and feet.

And again:

These are cold nights for poor folks and while we who have warm houses, sit by our blazing fires, let us not forget those who may be shivering in the cold. The other night we met on one of the back streets a party of Belgians wearily trudging through snowdrifts with some heavy green wicks which they have been cutting, we don't know where. Yean houses, when the second generation of this people shall be the prosperous and respected citizens of this country, they may tell how their fathers and mothers suffered during our long winters for food and fuel—with never an offer of help. They may have to tell it, but we hope not.

One reads as late as February, 1856:

A poor Belgian woman called on us a day or two since and requested us to seek information through our paper of two of her children—girls, one fourteen and the other nine years of age—and also of a Belgian woman with three small children who were separated from their families while on the road from Milwaukee to Fond du Lac and who have not been heard from since. She stated that the party left Milwaukee for Green Bay on the 24th of January on foot and when they had gone about ten miles on their way, they were joined by a man with a two-horse team, who, on being asked, allowed the girls and woman with her children to ride with him as far as the party on foot would probably reach by night. The team was lost sight of shortly thereafter and night came without learning anything of the missing children or the woman. Inquiries were made on the road but nothing satisfactory could be ascertained to give the party any clue to the mystery, and they came through to this place, after much hardship and suffering on the route, arriving on Wednesday of last week. The names of the two girls are Josephine and Pillemeuse Lafarens. Any information of the missing ones directed to this office will be joyfully received by their anxious families. Unable to make themselves understood and without means, their position must be a hard one wherever they are. Since learning of the above facts we have a report that a Belgian woman was found frozen to death in the woods a few miles above Du Pont.

It seems to me the greatest tragedy to face must have been the severing of home and family ties that could hardly be hoped to be retained again. Belgium in Europe was one endless village—America a place of vast silence and shadows and solitude.

From 1855 to 1857 the stream of Belgian immigration never subsided. The *Green Bay Advocate* chronicles their coming in items such as these:

The steamer, *Louisiana*, from Collingwood arrived at our docks on Monday morning with a large load of passengers and freight. Among

them were fifty Belgians who located in Bay Settlement in this county. 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.

And two weeks later:

The steamer *Huron* from Chicago came in on Saturday with sixty Belgians who we are informed will settle in the northern part of our county. Many more are on the way. Success to them!

The year 1857 saw the flood tide. Mass immigration of the Belgians to northeast Wisconsin was ended.

Holand in his splendid volume, *Wisconsin's Belgian Community*, mentions a tendency on the part of newcomers to exaggerate the wonders of their new home. He attributes this to the exceptional hardness and health of these trail blazers and their desire to have their judgment vindicated among the home people. One great-grandmother told me her fiance had written her that even the creek water in America ran sweet in the spring-time. When she got here, and after she was married, she found out that the phenomenon was induced by maple wood chips and a too-vivid imagination. They went home about eating breakfast with a fork. They forgot to write that that was because they only had potatoes to eat.

Personally, I believe that one of the hardest tasks in the world is clearing land. I have done some myself. But mark this, too—it is one of the most fascinating jobs there is. I have yet to meet the farmer who secretly does not exult in this battle with Nature. The creative feeling that goes with it far transcends the muscular agony that is a corollary.

Providence somehow plans these events we call contingencies. Invasion generally spells dispossession. Each time the Belgians were driven from their land, they were eager to return to it. Their nostalgic longing for their own acres has hood into them a love for the land that still survives in America.

I live in Casco, the geographic center of Kewaunee County. Casco is a traditionally Irish village. When I arrived in 1919 cleavage was well defined. To the east were the Irish—west and south the Bohemians—north the Belgians. Since then something

has happened. The workshops of science and industry have created new tools for agriculture that have had two profound effects on farm economy: larger crops and lower labor requirements. Again the Belgians are on the move. But sons and daughters are moving to adjacent farms and poststrapping the farm lands of other north Europe stocks in our neighborhood.

I, for one, am not displeased. Thrifty, fun loving, hospitable—they are splendid Americans. They make delightful neighbors. Recently one of my older Belgian friends accosted me in a local tavern after his day of celebration. He put his arm about my shoulder in an affectionate greeting and asked me to join him—*see gasts*.

"Lee, what nationality are you?" he asked. "Irish?"

"No," I answered.

"Not Irish? Maybe you are Bohemian?" he suggested.

"No, Guess again," I said.

"Well," he rejoined, "I don't care what you are. I like you so good, you could be Belgian."

I am still overwhelmed by the compliment.